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EXCITING WESTERN

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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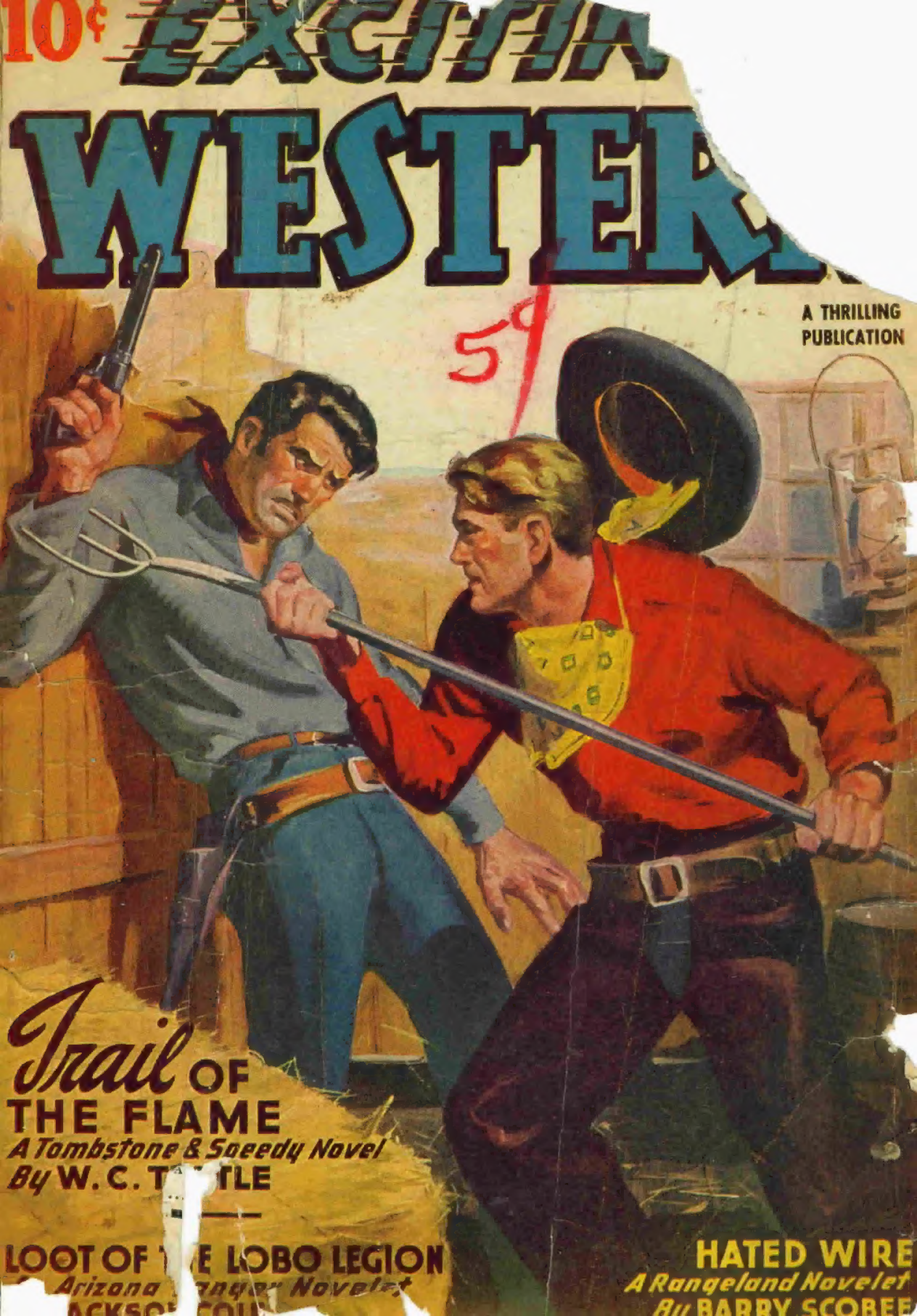

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By W. C. T[illegible]TLE

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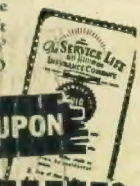

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VOL. 12, No. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION JANUARY, 1947

TRAIL OF THE FLAME

By W. C. TUTTLE

When they arrive at the sand-blasted cowtown of Turquoise City, those rollicking sleuths of the range—Tombstone and Speedy—are just in time to tangle with Poco Topete and his tough gang of smugglers! A rip-roaring action novel! 13

LOOT OF THE LOBO LEGION (A Novelet) ..... **Jackson Cole** 36
Arizona Ranger Navajo Raine rides into Little Pine, ready for a gunsmoke showdown with lynching hombres!

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Veteran rancher Whitey Sloan thought he'd try farmin' stuff, but you can't teach an old cow dog new tricks.

THE COWBOY HAD A WORD FOR IT! ..... **Chuck Stanley** 74
Our tenderfoot learns the language of prairie trees.

THE MEANEST MAN ..... **Gunnison Steele** 78
Sam Radd did not know which was worse—killing the banker, or telling the law his own pard had done it.

MANHUNTERS AIN'T HUMAN ..... **Sam Brant** 84
Hot anger over a killing thaws Sheriff Leach's heart but cannot alter the deadly wisdom of his icy stare.

TRAIL BLAZERS ..... **Captain Ranger** 6
A meaty department dedicated to the great outdoors.

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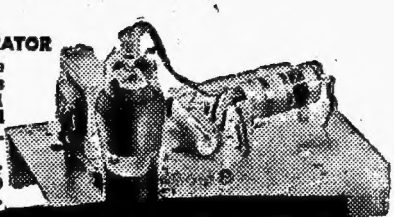

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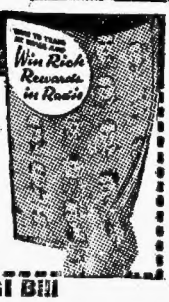

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A Department for Readers Conducted by CAPTAIN RANGER

FRIENDS, out in the growing Pacific Northwest reconversion is more than a fancy word. They're making it work. Buckling down to post-war activity and carrying out expansion plans have been going on for some time in that part of the country.

We're thinking particularly of Prosser, Washington, seat of Benton county down in the south-central part of the State.

Prosser, pre-war, was just another solidly built western town. Set on the bank of the Yakima river, with the famous Horse Heaven hills rising to the south, it was primarily a shipping point for cattle and sheep from the surrounding ranges.

Prosser also has a flour mill—one of the few remaining flour mills operated, thanks to the Yakima river, by water power.

Before the first white men ever hit the district, Indians used to camp at nearby Yakima Falls each year during the annual salmon runs.

Began as a Trading Post

The town began as a trading post for the vicinity's scattered ranchmen and the construction crews of the Northern Pacific railroad at the time steel was pushing through. That was about 1880. James Kinney, later joined by Colonel William Prosser, established Prosser as a permanent settlement.

That's the background of the place. Typically western, rich in the lore and tradition of the Northwest.

Along came the war. And a little place some forty miles away, Hanford, suddenly sprang into prominence. A lot of people worked there, but nobody was quite sure what they were doing. Hanford was a war secret. The site of an atomic bomb factory.

With no large towns near it, hundreds of wartime workers in the atomic bomb plant went clear to Prosser for living accommodations.

Thus, by a sort of reflex action, Prosser experienced a war boom. Some of the town's larger houses were remodelled into apartments. Space over the stores and office buildings along Prosser's cowtown main street were made into rooms for war workers to live in. New residences were built, as many as could be under wartime conditions.

Benton county's population, about 12,000 in 1940, was close to 25,000 in 1943. More thousands were added in 1944. And Prosser, the county's largest town, bore the brunt of the bulge.

Then the war ended. Prosser, instead of slumping back to its pre-war status, reconverted. It's still reconverting.

Of course business slowed down for a time. Many of the war workers, their war job done, went back to their original homes. But a whale of a lot of them stayed right there.

Friendly Country

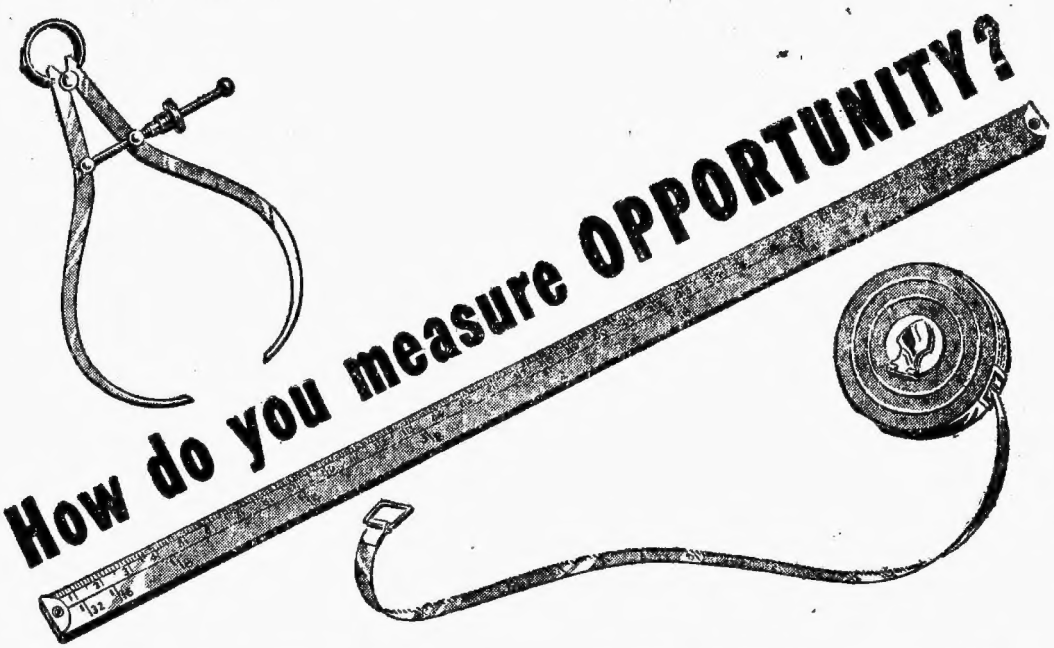
They liked Prosser, Benton county and the Pacific Northwest. And they liked it well enough to want to live there permanently. There was something about Horse Heaven hills, the Yakima river, the whole set-up, that made them want to stay. It was a friendly country.

New settlers have to have a means of making a living. That's Problem Number One—anywhere, Prosser included. In Benton county the answer seems to be agriculture.

Not in old-fashioned "starve one year and make a crop the next farming" fashion. That doesn't make for a stable economy. But irrigated farming . . . ah, that's different! And in Benton county, practically at Prosser's doorstep, lies a large portion of the 72,000 acres of new farm land embraced in the Roza division of the Yakima Irrigation Project. The project itself is one of the biggest irrigation undertakings of the U. S. Bureau of Reclamation in the Pacific Northwest.

When the project is completed it is due

(Continued on page 8)



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TRAIL BLAZERS

(Continued from page 6)

to bring irrigation water to some 30,000 new farm acres in Benton county. Water is ready now for delivery to about 15,000 acres. Water for the rest should be available this coming year, or certainly in the very near future.

Good Soil

And what about the local Benton county soil that this water will moisten? Experts have classified close to 80% of the new farm land embraced in Benton county's share of the irrigation project as No. 1 grade. That means it is considered most desirable for agricultural purposes on three counts—soil composition, land topography and location.

When Prosser started talking reconversion it had something to go on.

Prosser got action. Some time ago no less than 30 new farms in this general section were being readied for 1946 operation.

Somewhere, somehow, the new settlers were finding lumber to build their homes. And the chances are more new farms and more new homes have already been started.

Among the many commodities these newcomers plan to raise, or are raising now, are turkeys, chickens, fruits, vegetables, potatoes and alfalfa. There's a chance for dairy enterprises, too.

Meantime the businessmen of Prosser, eyeing their long established flour mill and contemplating a big increase in general crops once the new farmers really get going, are reported doing a little figuring of their own.

They are carefully studying various kinds of processing plants. They want to have them on hand to take care of the upsurge of crops. And they want them right in Prosser, handy for the farmers, and a local market for the farmers' produce.

Prosser already has one dehydrating plant. And an airport a mile or so out of town. It is that kind of town. History behind it, but its future still ahead of it.

Modern Pioneering

Establishing a new farm home on new land in the West—not necessarily just in Prosser, or Benton county, or even Washington, but anywhere where land opportunities are available—is a grand goal. It means a certain sort of modern pioneering. And it means a lot of hard work.

Yet for the person with a green thumb, or real love of agriculture and livestock in his makeup, farming as a way of life has compensations that transcend mere dollars and cents considerations. It is not all drudgery.

Farm community living is a friendly, neighbor-help-neighbor sort of life. And

(Continued on page 10)

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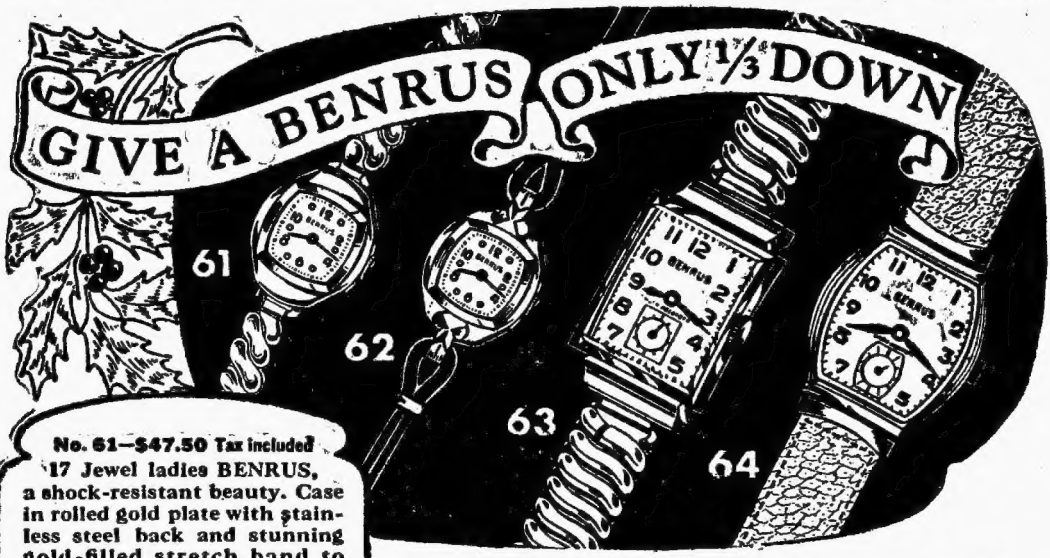

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TRAIL BLAZERS

(Continued from page 8)

when crops are put by or between seasons there are days for hunting and fishing. More of them in the long run than the average city dweller or city worker ever gets.

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That is a concrete problem the new settler has to face. And one the inexperienced are apt to overlook.

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So if you, or you and your family, can't take the long hard pull needed to get you over the hump, you'd better skip the whole idea. Pioneering is not for you.

On the other hand if you are willing to accept inconvenience, perhaps even hardship at first, the land is there and so is the opportunity. The new farms around Prosser are just a start, a drop in the bucket compared to the land available. The West is a mighty big country, and it is still growing.

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Irrigation provides ground moisture when and where it is needed. But it doesn't plan your farm for you. That is something you have to do yourself according to your personal preference, experience and the possibilities of the land.

Generally speaking the most common type of irrigated farm in the Pacific Northwest is diversified. Usually alfalfa is the major crop. In addition, some land is customarily reserved for good, irrigated pasture. Part of the acreage is almost always devoted to

(Continued on page 93)

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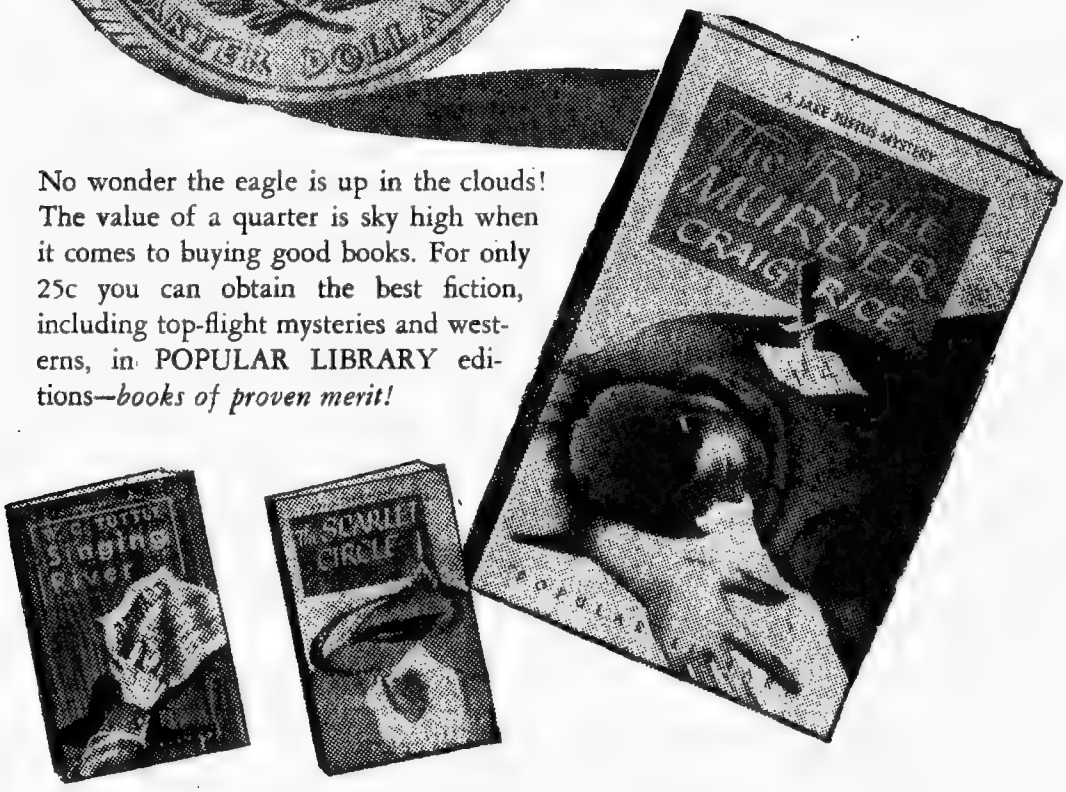

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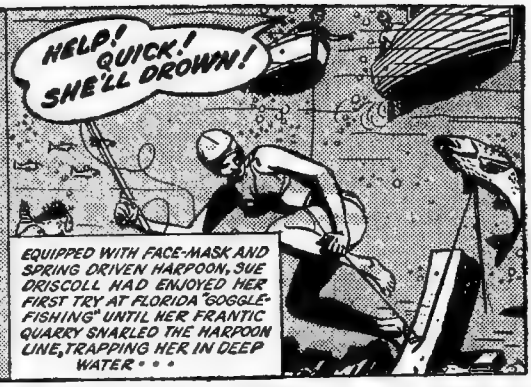
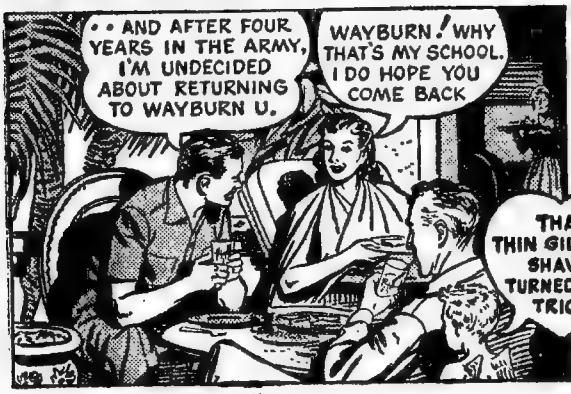

HELP! QUICK! SHE'LL DROWN!
EQUIPPED WITH FACE-MASK AND SPRING DRIVEN HARPOON, SUE DRISCOLL HAD ENJOYED HER FIRST TRY AT FLORIDA "GOGGLE-FISHING" UNTIL HER FRANTIC QUARRY SNARLED THE HARPOON LINE, TRAPPING HER IN DEEP WATER...


..AND AFTER FOUR YEARS IN THE ARMY, I'M UNDECIDED ABOUT RETURNING TO WAYBURN U.
WAYBURN! WHY THAT'S MY SCHOOL. I DO HOPE YOU COME BACK
THAT THIN GILLETTE SHAVE TURNED THE TRICK

FOR QUICK EASY SHAVES...GOOD-LOOKING AND REFRESHING...USE THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE THE KEENEST, LONGEST-LASTING BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD. ALSO THEY FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR TO A "T" AND PROTECT YOUR FACE FROM THE HARSH, IRRITATING EFFECT OF MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTE BLADES
THIN Gillette BLADES
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Three riders, traveling at full speed came at them, and the resultant crash was quite terrific

TRAIL OF THE FLAME

By W. C. TUTTLE

Arriving at the sand-blasted cowtown of Turquoise City, a rollicking pair of range sleuths are just in time to tangle with Poco Topete and his tough gang of smugglers!

CHAPTER I

"When Yuh're Rich"

A TELEGRAM from "Stormy" Knight, deputy sheriff of Apache Butte, to Jim Keaton, secretary of the Cattlemen's Association, read:

TOMBSTONE AND SPEEDY LEFT HERE IN A BUGGY WEARING BOILED SHIRTS PATENT LEATHER SHOES AND PERFUME. MIGHT END UP AT THE ASTOR HOTEL IN TURQUOISE CITY.

Jim Keaton puzzled over this telegram. He knew that his two cowboy detectives had received six thousand dollars reward for the capture of one, "Red Mask," and the clearing up of a mystery in Red Horse Valley. Though they had never made a report to him.

Another thing he knew was that they would not be worth a plugged nickel to him as long as that money lasted, which would be shortly after they met up with a roulette wheel. So Jim Keaton sent them a wire to the Astor Hotel at Turquoise City and waited for results.

In the meantime "Tombstone" Jones and "Speedy" Smith were not too happy with their new-found wealth. They had sold their horses and saddles, and bought a horse and buggy. They also had thrown away their

TOMBSTONE JONES

warsacks and bought two shiny valises, into which they had stuffed their range clothes.

While they were not exactly visible in the darkness, and inside the confines of a top-buggy, Tombstone Jones was close to seven feet tall and skinny enough to hide behind a six-by-six. His slatlike body was encased in a pin-striped suit, wide enough, but much too short, patent-leather shoes, white silk shirt and a blazing red tie. His pearl-colored fedora was a full size too small.

Speedy Smith was only five feet, seven inches tall, but was a small replica of Tombstone Jones. His garb was identical with that of Tombstone, except that Speedy's hat was too big. They did not think to trade hats. Thinking was not their forte.

It was about ten o'clock at night, with a full moon, and they had been driving for hours.

"I done told yuh we should have taken that right-hand fork," Speedy said.

"A road," said Tombstone philosophically, "must go somewheres."

"We ain't headin' for somewheres—we're headin' for Turquoise City."

"Good!"

"I don't mean on this road. We've been bearin' south."

"Listen," said Tombstone. "You can't tell east from west in the daytime. How can yuh tell directions at night?"

"I went to night school."

"Oh, well, that's different. Mebbe we are on the wrong road. Yuh know, Speedy, after all it don't make no difference. When yuh're rich, yuh don't care where yuh are."

"Rich!" Speedy spat dismally. "Rich! Ridin' in a buggy, dressed up like a blasted dude. I'm still sticky from that champagne. Twelve dollars a bottle, too! And what'd we get out of it?"

"Yeah, it didn't linger long," agreed Tombstone. "But it made a awful pretty noise when the cork blowed out. Mebbe it was the heat. But when yuh're rich—shall we open the other bottle?"

"No! I want to meet up with Turquoise City and get somethin' to eat. This road don't look like it was used much."

"It's got to go somewheres," insisted Tombstone. "Yuh don't just build roads without yuh've got a place in mind for 'em to go."

It was a narrow road, barely wide enough between the mesquite and cactus for a single vehicle to travel. Crooked, too. The moonlight was not too bright. Suddenly Tombstone drew up the horse, which had been plodding slowly.

"Thought I heard some shots," he said. They listened.

"I didn't hear nothin', except hunger gnawin' at my stummick," said Speedy. "Sort of a raspin' sound."

Tombstone slapped the lines on the horse's rump, and they went on.

"If we stay on this road long enough," he said, "well git somewheres."

"At the speed yuh're drivin', it won't do us any good," said Speedy. "Well starve to death long before that."

Tombstone took the whip from the socket, and the horse broke into a trot, which wasn't so pleasant on that wash-board road. Speedy shoved his fedora out of his eyes as they started around a sharp curve.

"He-e-ey!" Tombstone yelled. "Look out, yuh—"

His yell came too late to do any good. Three riders, traveling at full speed, were into them, and the resulting crash was quite terriffic. The air was full of flailing feet, pieces of buggy, and startled profanity.

Gradually the dust settled. A man was in the middle of the road, flat on his back. Near him was a saddled horse, its neck twisted grotesquely.

What there was left of the buggy was upside down, and the buggy horse was tangled up in the mesquite. From the wreckage of the buggy, like a slow-motion jack-in-a-box, arose Tombstone Jones. He adjusted the hat he didn't have on, and stared around in a dazed sort of way.

"Well, we got somewhere, didn't we?" he said.

Speedy Jones crawled out of the mesquite, minus half of his pin-striped suit, and got up on his slightly-bowed legs.

"We stopped somewheres, too, seems to me," he said.

"Whozzat out there?" asked Tombstone. "Looks dead to me."

"Well," replied Speedy, "I reckon he's the other half of the collision. Hyah, feller!"

The man didn't move. Tombstone stumbled over and looked at him. The man wasn't dead, but he was awful quiet in sleep.

"Might blame us for it, yuh know," Speedy said.

"Yea-a-a-ah!" breathed Tombstone. "Got to get goin', I reckon. Hate to walk."

"We've still got a hoss," said Speedy. "Wait'll I get him loose. Mabbe we can ride him."

The buggy horse didn't seem hurt much. Speedy uncinched the saddle from the dead horse and cinched it on the buggy horse, which didn't seem too pleased over the operation. Speedy had less of his pin-striped suit than Tombstone. They had both lost their hats. Tombstone got their valises from the smashed buggy, and held them, while Speedy got into the saddle.

"This here quadruped," panted Speedy, "is more used to pullin' than liftin'. Whoa, yuh jughead!"

Tombstone managed to get up behind Speedy, each of them trying to hang onto their valises and stay with the horse, too. Then they heard two voices.

"I don't know what happened, I tell yuh!" a man wailed. "Somethin' hit me."

"Hit me, too," said the other man. "H-o-omer! Yoo-hoo! Homer!"

"He's pagin' Homer," said Speedy. "C'mon, bronc—we don't want to answer questions."

"Our name ain't Homer," said Tombstone, and booted the horse.

The horse lurched ahead, trying to pitch, but the burden was too great for him to more than go through the motions. Behind them one of the men yelled something, and a moment later a bullet almost skidded off Tombstone's right shoulder.

Luckily there was another sharp turn in the road, and they went out of sight of the shooter. The horse, discovering that bucking was of no avail, elected to run. That was exactly what was needed.

A mile further on, with the horse ready to call it quits, they came to a fork in the road. The right-hand fork said:

TURQUOISE CITY—TWO MILES

"I told yuh," crowed Tombstone, "that if

SPEEDY SMITH

yuh stay on a road long enough—well yuh're shore to go somewheres."

"And meet some fascinatin' people," added Speedy. "Yuh know, I don't know why we hightailed it away from there so fast. Them fellers was as much to blame as us."

"Yeah, I reckon they was—but that feller with the gun didn't think so. Just a impulsive person, I reckon. Lookin' at it any way yuh want to, it was a awful thing to happen to a wealthy man."

"How do yuh figger that?"

"It busted all seven seegars in my pocket, and we'll never get that bottle of champagne back."

"It wasn't no good anyway. All I hanker for is some food and a soft bed for to lie the carcass. I tell yuh, I'm tired."

"It has been a long ride," agreed Tombstone. "Yuh get kind of cramped in a buggy."

They finally came in sight of the lights of Turquoise City, and Speedy guided the horse off the road.

"We ain't there yet, pardner," Tombstone said.

"I know we ain't. Slide off, will yuh? Ain't nobody goin' to put me in jail for stealin' a saddle. I'm goin' to hang this hull up in this here mesquite thicket, and turn the hoss loose. We'll walk into town."

"Yea-a-ah," agreed Tombstone. "Mebbe yuh're right— as much as I hate to walk. Yuh don't figger they'll make any trouble, do yuh?"

"Well, they shot at us, and yuh can't figger that as friendly."

Speedy wormed his way into the thicket and hung up the saddle. The horse, stripped of riding gear, wandered away, probably relieved to get away from them, while they took their valises and plodded down the dusty road to Turquoise City.

Old Jim Shane, keeper of the Astor Hotel, stared across his little desk, as they came into the lobby. Neither of the two cowboys was more than partly dressed, and both were scratched and bruised. One of Tombstone's pants legs was torn off at the knee, and the other knee was sticking through a long rent in the fabric. Speedy's coat was slit down the back, making it difficult for him to keep it on his thin shoulders.

They came up to the desk and dropped their valises.

"Have yuh got any rooms?" asked Speedy.

"Why—huh—yea-a-ah," said Old Jim. "Yeah, we've got rooms. The bridal suite ain't in use. It's four-bits a day extra."

"What for?" asked Tombstone.

"Two winders. The other rooms ain't got but one."

Speedy rubbed his sore nose. "We'll take it," he said, "and then we can both look out at the same time."

"Is there anything to see in Turquoise City?" asked Tombstone.

"There is now," replied the old man. "Go right up the stairs and it's the second door on the right."

"And another item," said Speedy. "Where can we get some supper?"

"Up the street a little ways—High Hop's place."

"Shall we go up there now?" asked Speedy.

Tombstone shook his head. "In our position," he said soberly, "we must dress for supper."

They went limping up the stairs, carrying their valises. Old Jim Shane squinted after them, until they disappeared in the dark hallway. He shook his head and grinned slowly.

"Is there anything to see in Turquoise City!" he grunted. "I'd tell a man—and it just went upstairs."

They came down in a few minutes and found a man talking with Old Jim Shane. He had a telegram for Tombstone from Jim Keaton, which Speedy read. It said:

NO REPORT FROM YOU. DO YOU THINK I AM A MIND READER.

"Can yuh send a telegram for me?" asked Speedy.

"Shore" the man said. "I'm from the depot."

Speedy wired Jim Keaton, collect:

WE DON'T THINK SO. BETTER TRY A CRYSTAL BALL

CHAPTER II

A Man Named Jones

TURQUOISE CITY, so called because there were no turquoises in that vicinity, was merely a sand-blasted cow-town, three miles from the Mexican border, surrounded on all sides by desert hills. The Astor Hotel resembled any other Astor Hotel in name only.

The next morning Tombstone and Speedy sat on the rickety porch and smoked cigars. Both of them hated cigars, but smoking them, they thought, made them look important. Good two-bit cigars, too. When you bit the end off and blew through them you'd get more dust than you would out of a vacuum-cleaner. They had been aged in the box.

Tombstone gestured grandly and showered himself with ashes and pieces of burning cigar wrapper.

"Bein' rich is a grand feelin'," he declared. "Yuh know, I feel sorry for—Whoa, Nellie!"

Tombstone flung the cigar into the street, and dug deeply into his shirt, his features anguished.

"Dad-blamed leaves!" he wailed. "Caught my undershirt on fire! Seegars may be the trade-mark of a millionaire, but they shore irk me a heap. They smell bad, too."

"That's yore undershirt," said Speedy.

It was getting hot on the porch, so they went inside.

Old Jim Shane was half-asleep behind his desk, when a man came in. He was a short, fat man, wearing riding-pants, well-polished English riding boots, a cutaway

The five men had no chance to dodge before Tombstone's sorrel crashed into them, sending them spinning

coat and a derby hat. He was also carrying a crop in his gloved hand. He was as out-of-place in Turquoise City as a brass door-knob on a pup tent.

Old Jim peered over the counter-top at the man.

"Somethin' I can do for yuh?" he asked.

"I am looking for a man named Jones," the man announced in asthmatic tones.

Old Jim squinted thoughtfully for a moment or two.

"Jones, eh? Oh, yeah. That's Jones over there."

The fat man looked Tombstone over from his boots to the battered Stetson he wore in place of the lost fedora. The man didn't seem to miss a single detail. He looked back at Old Jim.

"Surely there must be another," he said.

"Outside of him," replied the hotel keeper, "we're fresh out of Joneses."

"Humf!" snorted the fat man, and headed for the doorway.

"Yuh might try later," suggested Old Jim. "Yuh never can tell when we'll get a new one in here."

But the fat man didn't seem interested, because he kept on going. No one said anything for a while, and then Speedy said:

"Awful choosey, ain't he? What could he expect—by the name of Jones?"

"What do yuh reckon that fancy feller wanted?" asked Tombstone.

"Sounded like he was lookin' for a man named Jones," said the hotel man quietly, "but you didn't suit him. Mebbe yuh was too tall. Yuh see, a man with as much money as he's got can have any length Jones he wants, I reckon."

"Got lots of money?" asked Tombstone.

"That is Homer G. Gates," said Old Jim.

"Yuh mean to say that that feller is Homer G. Gates?" asked the astonished Tombstone. "Yuh mean, he's really Homer G. Gates?"

"Did yuh ever hear of him before?" asked Speedy.

"No," admitted Tombstone," I never did. But he shore wore some awful pretty clothes. And I could smell him clear over here. But why'd he be lookin' for me?"

Speedy shook his head and looked at Old Jim.

"Not only is he too long for any bed, and doubles up on me at night," said Speedy, "but I have *that* to contend with, too."

"We all have burdens to bear, I reckon," said Old Jim. "Say! I forgot to tell yuh that another telegram came for yuh early this mornin'. I've got it in my desk."

It was from Jim Keaton, and said:

A MAN WILL CONTACT YOU THERE. MAKE YOUR OWN SALARY DEAL. MAIL ME DETAILED REPORT ON RED HORSE VALLEY DEAL.

They wandered back to the hotel porch and sat down. Out on the sidewalk, close to the porch, was Homer G. Gates, talking with two tall, hard-looking men who wore range clothes.

"We're not tryin' to be hard on anybody, Gates," one of them said. "We had a gun-fight last night with three men who came across the Border and didn't stop at our challenge. They got away, and we don't know who they were. But today we found a dead hoss on the road to yore ranch. The saddle had been stripped off—and the hoss wears yore Seven Cross brand."

"I sometimes sell horses," said Gates vaguely. "After all, gentlemen, I cannot be held responsible on such evidence."

"We've told yuh several times, Gates," said the other man, "that yore son is travelin' in bad company. Verde Vista is no place for him. Don't blame us if he ends up in a Federal prison."

"Federal prison?" asked Gates huskily.

"That's right. We're goin' to stop this dope smugglin' and we don't care who it hurts."

"Smuggling? Ridiculous! My son wouldn't smuggle drugs. He has all the money he needs. He doesn't have to make money."

"We've warned yuh," said the man. "Don't blame us."

THE two men came up on the porch, looked sharply at Tombstone and Speedy, as Old Jim Shane came to the doorway.

"We've been layin' down the law to Gates," one of the men said to him grinning. "That fool kid of his is monkeyin' with dynamite, spendin' his time down at Verde Vista. Jim, yuh ain't heard about anybody smashin' up a buggy last night, have yuh?"

Old Jim rubbed his stubbled chin, and his eyes shifting for a fraction of a second to Tombstone and Speedy.

"Bustin' up a buggy?" he parroted. "No, I ain't, Al. How come?"

"We'd like to know. Down the road a piece. Kind of looks like a rider might have crashed the buggy. Hoss broke its neck, and the saddle was taken away. We—me and Ed—had a run-in with two, three riders from Verde Vista. They wouldn't stop."

"Huh!" grunted Old Jim quietly. "Well, if I hear anything I'll shore let you know."

"Much obliged, Jim. See yuh later."

The two Border patrolmen went away, and Old Jim sat down on the porch.

"What sort of an hombre is Gates' son?" Tombstone said.

"Oh, him. Yuh mean Homer, the Second?"

"How come he's second?" asked Tombstone.

"Shortage of names in the family, I reckon. Named him after his pa."

"It sounds like Homer's readyin' himself to be a prodigal," remarked Speedy.

"Homer the Second," said Old Jim, "ain't exactly a credit to the human race. He's fat-headed and ignorant, drinks like a fish and thinks he owns the earth. Ain't mor'n twenty. He's got a sister, crowdin' nineteen, I'd estimate, which is awful good-lookin', but his ma is tall and hefty, with as mean a eye as I've seen since Geronimo surrendered. It's been said aloud that Homer G. Gates didn't raise his daughter— name of Gloria— to fall in love with no cowboy.

"Gates bought out the Seven Cross, which is knowed now as the Casa del Rey. Big spread, bein' a old Spanish Grant. Cost him a fortune, I reckon. Aims to use it as a restin' spot and raise fancy cows and fast hosses."

Old Jim yawned and went back into the hotel.

"Yuh know what?" Tombstone said. "Me and you have got to buy a couple hosses and saddles. Let's look over at the feed corral. Mebbe we can pick up somethin'."

The owner of the feed corral was interested. He had two awful good horses. Probably the best horses that ever wore shoes. Saddles? Well, he had two, but he'd hate to sell them too reasonable. First-class saddles were hard to find. 'Course, he was a little shy on money these days, so he might sell.

They got the horses and saddles.

"It's a funny thing, speakin' about saddles," the corral man said, "I was hearin' two of the Border Patrol men tellin' about somebody takin' a saddle off a dead hoss last night."

"What's funny about that?" asked Speedy. "They don't usually bury 'em with the saddle on, do they?"

"No they don't. But last night a loose hoss wandered in here, no bridle nor saddle, but his sweat marks showed that he'd been saddled and rode awful hard. I never seen the hoss before, and I ain't never seen that brand before."

"Mebbe they also unsaddle live hosses around here, too," suggested Speedy

"Yeah, I reckon so. I never gave that a thought."

The man made out the bill-of-sale.

"Yore name's Jones, eh? I heard Homer G. Gates askin' about that name today. He owns the Casa del Rey. Mebbe he was lookin' for you—I don't know. He's Homer the Second's pa."

"Do you know Homer?" asked Speedy.

"I'm shore you'll like them two hosses, gents," replied the man, deliberately ignoring the question. "I'll keep 'em fed up for yuh."

Two riders came into Turquoise City late that afternoon. Tombstone watched them dismount.

"If that ain't Elmer Higgins," he said to Speedy. "I'll go upstairs and eat that misfit valise. I don't know the other one."

"Who's Elmer?" asked Speedy.

"Oh, just a acquaintance of mine. I got him out of jail over in New Mexico once."

"Used yore influence?" queried Speedy.

"Nope—a hack-saw. We was in there together."

"Yuh've shore had some awful moral friends in the past," sighed Speedy.

"Got some yet," said Tombstone.

IN a moment the man designated as Elmer Higgins left his companion and came over to the hotel. He stepped up on the porch, stopped short and stared at Tombstone, who said quietly:

"Hyah, Elmer."

"Old Hack-saw Jones!" Elmer said.

"Meet Speedy Smith, Elmer," said Tombstone. "He's my pardner."

They shook hands, and Elmer sank down in a rickety chair. Tombstone squinted at the badge on Elmer's shirt. Elmer was as bow-legged as a barrel-stave, and chewed tobacco.

"The worst outlaws sometimes make the best officers," Tombstone said.

"Well, mebbe," said Elmer. "I'll make yuh a deal, Jones. If yuh don't say nothin' about my past I'll keep my mouth shut, too. I'm still usin' the same name."

"So'm I," said Tombstone. "I changed it several times, but never could remember the name I took. Awful embarrassin', Elmer. So yuh're a deputy sheriff."

Elmer spat over the railing and nodded.

"Uh-huh. Been one for over a year. Me and Dan O'Leary, the sheriff, just rode in. Yuh'll like Dan O'Leary."

"Why?" asked Tombstone.

"Well, for one thing, he ain't nosey."

"Did yuh come down here for anythin' special?" asked Speedy.

"Uh-huh. Feller named Gates reports that he's lost thirty head of hosses, worth a thousand dollars a head. He owns the Casa del Rey spread. Some rich hombre, they tell me. Even at that, hosses ain't worth that much, unless they got gold teeth. Fancy hosses, he says. Use 'em for that thing they call polo. Wasn't a brand on any of 'em. Didn't want to mark their hides."

"No brands?" queried Tombstone. "No marks? How long has this kinda thing been goin' on, Elmer? You knowed it, and didn't let me know?"

"I didn't know it until Dan got this report. Like I said, I've been livin' straight."

"I know, but—Elmer! No brands!"

"Yeah, it's embarrassin'," admitted Elmer.

"Here's Mr. Gates now," said Speedy, pointing over the railing.

"Yeah, I reckon it is," agreed Elmer. "That's Slim Cantrell with him. Slim's his foreman. I better go over and help Dan talk to him."

CHAPTER III

Missing Man

ELMER bow-legged his way across the street to the Silk Hat Saloon, where Sheriff Dan O'Leary had met Homer G. Gates and his foreman, "Slim" Cantrell. They all went back to the hitch-rack, where they wouldn't be overheard, and began a long discussion. Slim Cantrell was tall and slender, wore a small mustache, scanty side-burns, and his garb ran to colors and silver ornaments.

"Awful pretty foreman," remarked Speedy.

"Kinda glittery," said Tombstone. "But yuh can expect anything on a ranch where they don't brand their hosses. Thousand-dollar broncs—and not a mark. Man, this could have been a hoss-thief's paradise."

"It kinda looks like it was," observed Speedy. "Somebody got away with thirty thousand dollars worth."

"And I got twenty-nine dollars for thirty head once," sighed Tombstone.

"Was that why yuh turned honest?" asked Speedy.

"It was what yuh might call a contributin' factor, Speedy."

"Oh-oh!" grunted Speedy. "Company comin'."

The four men were coming over from the hitch-rack, with the sheriff in the lead. They came up on the porch.

"Which one of yuh is Jones?" the sheriff asked.

"It's this'n, Dan," said Elmer, pointing. "Tombstone, this is Dan O'Leary, the sheriff."

"Howdy," said Tombstone. "Yeah, I'm Jones."

The sheriff looked him over carefully. "Was you sent here by the Cattlemen's Association?" he asked bluntly.

"No, sir," replied Tombstone truthfully.

"I told yuh!" crowed Elmer.

"My opinion exactly," added Homer G. Gates.

"There bein' no affirmative votes," said Speedy, "what's next?"

"I don't know," sighed the sheriff.

"Find my missing horses," suggested Homer G. Gates.

"Yeah, that's right," agreed the sheriff. "C'mon, Elmer."

"And," added Homer G. Gates, "you might also find out who ran into my son last night, killed his horse and stole his saddle."

"Did yore son get hurt?" asked Speedy.

"Not seriously."

"Next time," said Speedy soberly, "mebbe he'll stop when the Border Patrol yells at him."

Homer G. Gates looked bleakly at Speedy, but made no comment. The sheriff and deputy looked questioningly at Speedy, expecting him to elaborate, but Speedy went no further.

"We might as well go back to the ranch, Mr. Gates," Slim Cantrell said.

"Yes, yes, I suppose so," replied the fat man testily, and went away with Slim.

"We might as well go, too," said Elmer. "See yuh later, Tombstone. Nice to have met yuh, Speedy."

"That's always a matter of opinion," Speedy said, and grinned. . . .

A little later, Mrs. Homer G. Gates and her daughter came to Turquoise City in a two-seated buggy, driven by a cowboy. Tombstone almost fell over the porch railing, trying to get a good look at the daughter.

"Man alive!" he gasped. "She's as pretty as a pitcher."

Speedy went over to the railing, rolling a cigarette. Gloria Gates turned and looked straight at him, as the two women headed for the general store.

"She's average," Speedy said, then lighted the cigarette, threw it away, and put the match in his mouth.

"I'm just wonderin'," said Tombstone, "if

Homer G. Gates needs a good cowhand on his place."

"And you with three thousand dollars?" asked Speedy.

"Yea-a-ah, that's right. I plumb forgot my wealth. That's what love does to yuh. Yuh forget everythin'. Man, is she pretty!" Tombstone leaned back and closed his eyes. "If I had a woman like her there's no tellin' how far I'd go."

"The same thing applies to stealin' a hoss," said Speedy.

"Love and business ain't the same, Speedy."

They watched the women come back and get into the buggy, but neither Mrs. Gates nor her daughter looked toward the hotel porch.

"She's prob'ly scared of her ma," said Speedy. "Didn't want her to know she made eyes at us."

"Us?" queried Tombstone. "She was a-lookin' at me."

"We're pardners, ain't we?"

"Always arguin'! I'm goin' to get somethin' to eat, and then I'm goin' to find a poker game. I need exercise."

TOMBSTONE found the poker game, but the stakes were not high enough for a man of his means. However, it was good practise.

It was not interesting to Speedy. He talked with the bartender and had a few drinks. Speedy mentioned Verde Vista.

"That's a good place to keep away from," the bartender said quietly.

"What's wrong with it?"

"Poco Topete and his gang."

"What do they do for a livin'?" asked Speedy.

"Smugglin', mostly, I reckon. The Border officers got wind of a big jewel deal, though, and they're shore watchin' close. I'd shore like a chance to grab off a cargo of diamonds. Yuh can turn 'em in to the Federal officers and get twenty-five per cent of the value of the diamonds."

"Or keep 'em and get a hundred per cent, huh?" asked Speedy.

"Well, yuh can let yore conscience be yore guide, I reckon."

Speedy wandered outside and walked over to the hotel. He was out of tobacco, and the stores were closed, so he would have to go to the room, where he had a supply. Old Jim Shane was behind his counter, reading

In a flash Tombstone was up, his gun out, covering the doorway

a dog-eared old book, his glasses out near the end of his nose, as Speedy passed through the lobby.

Speedy went up to the room and went inside. He had started for the table, fumbling for a match, when something hit him on the head. His consciousness went out in a shower of shooting stars. . . .

It was an hour later when Tombstone sauntered into the hotel. Old Jim Shane was still behind the counter, reading. Tombstone asked him if he had seen Speedy.

"Oh, he went up to the room an hour ago," Old Jim replied, "and I ain't seen him since. Prob'ly gone to bed."

Tombstone rubbed his chin thoughtfully and headed for the stairs. It was not like Speedy to go to bed that early.

Reaching the room, Tombstone lighted a match and looked around. Then he lighted the lamp and looked the room over again. The two valises were empty, flung aside, the contents scattered. The bed had not been occupied. On the floor was one of the telegrams from Jim Keaton, the one telling them that a man would contact them there.

Tombstone sat down, rolled a cigarette, and tried to puzzle out what had happened. There was a discolored spot on the old rug, and he tested it with his finger. It was still damp, and decidedly red.

Tombstone went into the hallway and made his way to the rear stairway. With lighted matches he examined the steps. A trickle of blood had zigzagged its way clear to the bottom.

Someone had slugged Speedy in the room and had taken him down the rear stairway. They had also examined their belongings in the room, and that telegram linked them definitely with the Cattlemen's Association. But they had done nothing to incur the enmity of anyone in Turquoise City and they were not working for Homer G. Gates.

Tombstone went back to the little lobby. Old Jim peered at him over his glasses.

"Did yuh find him?" he asked.

Tombstone leaned on the counter.

"Yuh ain't seen nobody around here this evenin', have yuh?" he asked.

"No, I ain't—except yore pardner. Ain't he up there?"

"Yuh hadn't ort to say 'ain't,' " replied Tombstone quietly. "It ain't good English, Jim. Anyway, he ain't there. Our stuff has all been pawed around, and there's blood on the carpet and plumb down the back stairs."

"Blood?" queried Old Jim. "Did yuh say blood?"

"Uh-huh—red stuff. The kind yuh get when yuh cut yourself."

Old Jim stared at Tombstone, his eyes squinted.

"Blood, huh? Well, mebbe he had a nosebleed."

"Ye-a-ah—mebbe," breathed Tombstone. "That'd make him throw our stuff all over the room, and go down the back stairs. Somebody laid for him up there—and knocked him cold."

"Why?" asked Old Jim blankly.

Tombstone sighed, cuffed his hat over one eye, and stared at the floor.

"I'm out of answers to that one," he said.

"Wait a minute!" grunted Old Jim. "I believe the sheriff and deputy are stayin' out at the Casa del Rey!"

"Aw, they wouldn't do it," said Tombstone. "I've got to look for who done it myself—and I don't know where to look."

"I didn't mean that they done it. They'd help yuh, I think."

"You thank 'em for me, will yuh?" asked Tombstone, and went out. . . .

DOWN in the rocks and mesquite not far from the Border, was a little shack, pretty well hidden away. "Shorty" Deal, a desert rat, lived there. Shorty was mostly hair, whiskers and hopes. It was after midnight that night, when a lone horseman came down through the mesquite and rode up to his door.

"Shorty!" he called. "This is Al Stevens."

After a few moments the door opened, and the man went into the little shack. Shorty lighted a candle and placed it on the table. His visitor was a tall man, clad in cowboy raiment, hard-faced in the flickering candlelight. He sat on the one chair, while Shorty sat on the edge of his bunk.

Al Stevens was one of the Border Patrol, hard-riding, cold-jawed minions of Border law. And because Shorty spent some of his time in Verde Vista, at times he was a source of valuable information to the Patrol.

Stevens rolled and lighted a cigarette, passing the match to Shorty who lighted an old pipe.

"What's new, Shorty?" asked Stevens.

Shorty shrugged. "Not much, Al," he replied. "There's somethin' wrong in Verde Vista. It strikes me that some of them smart hombres have been hit in the pockets. Just how, I don't know."

"How do yuh mean, Shorty?"

"Well, Al"—Shorty puffed thoughtfully—"did yuh ever hear of the Flame of the Temple?"

"Flame of the Temple? Why, I—yeah, I

have. That's a diamond."

"I figgered it was, Al. Diamond Charley Wong and a man named Stone are down there. Been there five, six days, and they ain't happy, seems like. I couldn't get a whole lot—little here and a little there. Poco Topete and Charley and this Stone—"

"Is Stone short and fat, wears glasses?"

"That's right. Do yuh know him?"

"Know about him. He's from Frisco. Keep talkin' Shorty—it makes sense."

"Like I told yuh, I only get a little bit, here and there. I did hear that the Flame of the Temple is too big to handle. They've got to get it cut into small pieces. Too risky the way it is."

"Correct. They've got to get it to a crook who can cut it for them. But where is the stone now?"

"I don't know. Piecin' everything together, the thing is too valuable for any one man to buy it, even in Mexico. I don't know what the deal is. I heard Stone say to another man, 'Thirty or forty thousand is too much to lose, but we've got to take the chance.' That was five, six days ago."

"Yuh don't reckon they've lost the thing, do yuh, Shorty?"

"I don't know, but I do know they ain't happy."

"Are yuh goin' back?"

"Tomorrow, I reckon. I'll be back in two, three days, Al. Mebbe I can hear more."

"Much obliged, Shorty."

Al Stevens ground the light from his cigarette and went back to his horse.

CHAPTER IV

Below the Border

NO IDEAS came to Tombstone Jones about where to look for Speedy. He saddled his horse, after finding that Speedy's horse and saddle were still in the stable, and rode south. He knew it was dangerous to carry arms into Mexico, but danger didn't mean much to Tombstone Jones.

There was no one at the Border line to stop him, so he rode on to Verde Vista.

A bright moon lighted the dusty old road where it wound off a low mesa and down to the little Mexican town, with its one street and scattered adobes. There was one two-storied adobe with a red-tiled roof, which might have been a mission, but wasn't. It was *La Golondrina Cantina,* apparently the only lighted building in Verde Vista.

Tombstone tied his horse at a deserted hitch-rack, and went up near the *cantina.* He could hear a Mexican orchestra playing, and the usual sounds of revelry from such an establishment. Now that he was in Verde Vista, he didn't know just what to do. He moved around behind the *cantina* and sat down in the heavy shadow of an old adobe stable.

To his left was a low wing of the *cantina,* unlighted, which might have been used for living quarters or storage. He could hear the sounds of horses in the stable, and from back in the hills came the weird, yapping howl of a coyote, as though protesting against the orchestra's rendition of "La Paloma."

Then the door of the low wing opened and a man came out. He was in the heavy shadow, hardly visible, except from the glow of his cigarette. Then three more men came out, and all four of them came to the stable. One of the men was either intoxicated, or a prisoner, because two of the men were guiding him.

Tombstone sagged there in the shadows and waited. They brought out three horses, and one man was already mounted. After a few words, spoken too quietly for Tombstone to hear them, the three men rode away, and the fourth went back to the *cantina.*

Tombstone hurried down to his horse, cut in between two adobes, circled back to the old stable and took the trail of the three men. It was an old road, heading due south. Tombstone was sure that one of the men was a prisoner. The man was too big to be Speedy, but he wanted to see where they were taking him anyway.

Tombstone didn't dare ride fast, for fear of overtaking the men, because the road was narrow, crooked, hemmed in an all sides by desert growth. About four miles south of Verde Vista, the road came to an end at an old adobe ranchhouse, hidden away in a grove of ancient sycamores.

Tombstone rode into the heavy shadow behind the stable and tied his horse. Three saddled horses were tied near the front of the house, and while Tombstone looked the place over, two of the men he had followed came out, mounted and started back, leading the extra horse. There was not a light showing in the ranchhouse.

There was a big corral, in which a sizable herd of horses were held. Tombstone was unable to see their brands, but he had a feeling that these were Homer G. Gates' missing polo ponies. Tombstone circled the old adobe ranchhouse, but came back to the stable, deciding to wait until daylight to make any investigation.

It was probably the longest night Tombstone had ever spent. Screech owls in the sycamores and coyotes in the hills never seemed to get tired of their own voices. A chill wind did not help the situation, and when daylight finally came, Tombstone was stiff and weary.

When he saw smoke coming from the old chimney he moved in close to the rear entrance, waiting for someone to appear. The door opened and out came a lean, stringy-looking *mestizo,* half-breed Mexican and Yaqui. He yawned and began picking up some scattered mesquite roots for the fire.

Tombstone stepped around the corner, not over ten feet from the man. The surprise was complete. The man jerked back, his black eyes registering panic. But gradually he regained control of his nerves.

"Hyah," Tombstone said.

The end of the man's tongue moistened his lips.

"*No entender,*" he replied.

Tombstone smiled slowly. The man was clad in a loose-fitting, colorless old shirt, faded overalls and *alpargatas,* hemp sandals. He had no visible weapons.

"Are yuh alone here?" Tombstone said.

"*No entender,*" repeated the Mexican. He leaned over, as though to pick up another chunk of wood, and from somewhere—Tombstone never did know where—a throwing-knife appeared in his right hand.

AS SWIFT as the striking of a rattler, the Mexican threw that wicked-looking knife. But the Mexican was no quicker than the long, lean cowboy, who went to his haunches so quickly that the knife flashed over his left shoulder, the metal guard jerking at his shirt.

The next moment Tombstone dived ahead, circling the lean waist of the Mexican with his long, powerful arms. The knife-thrower yelped once, as Tombstone came up in a swing. One complete turn, a release, and the man crashed against the corner of the house, a dozen feet away.

Tombstone went to one knee, but was up in a flash, his gun out, covering the doorway. But no one came. Gradually the tall cowboy relaxed, stepped over and looked at the knife expert who would not be throwing knives for a long time. Then he went gingerly into the old adobe ranchhouse.

The place was dirty and didn't smell too well. Dirt floors, cobwebby walls and ceilings. The main room was foggy from a smoldering fire in the fireplace, and on a crude bunk was a man, all tied up with ropes, but not gagged. It wasn't Speedy. Tombstone looked him over.

"All right, you dirty pup," the man said, "if it's money you want, say so."

"Don't we all?" asked Tombstone quietly. "Who are you?"

"I am Homer G. Gates, the Second," replied the young man painfully.

"Howdy, Homer." Tombstone grinned. "I've heard of you. My name's Jones."

"If you are one of Topete's gang, you're probably lying."

"Topete's gang brought yuh here, eh?"

"What do you think?"

Tombstone sat down on the end of the bunk and considered the young man. Homer the Second was fat and pudgy, with a generous waist line, pouty mouth and scowling eyes. His hair was mousy-blond. He was the man who had been knocked off his horse when the buggy was wrecked.

"I heard yuh got hurt the other night," said Tombstone.

"I got knocked stiff," Homer said soberly.

"Just why did they tie yuh up and bring yuh here, Homer?"

"You ask them—I never had a chance. I don't know why. What's your part in this deal, Jones—if that is your name."

"I'm lookin' for my pardner, Speedy Smith. They got him, too."

"Are you going to let me loose?" Homer asked anxiously.

Tombstone untied him. Homer sat up and flexed his muscles—what he had, for most of him was fat.

"We better be movin', Homer," Tombstone said. "They'll be comin' back."

Homer was willing enough to move. When they went outside he stared at the Mexican at the corner of the house.

"Dead?" he whispered anxiously.

"Just sleepin'," replied Tombstone.

They went down to the corral, where the horses milled around.

"We've got to get us some rollin' stock, Homer," declared Tombstone. "I don't reckon yore dad would mind if I rode one of his hosses."

"You mean those are Dad's horses?" exclaimed Homer.

"If they ain't, Topete is raisin' some awful good broncs."

There were two fairly good saddles in the stable, and it was no effort for Tombstone to rope a tall sorrel out of the herd. He cinched on the saddle, fashioned a rope hackamore, and led the animal down to where his own horse was hidden.

"Yuh better ride my hoss, Homer," he said. "Yuh can't tell what this'n might do. We're goin' to cut them hosses loose and head 'em toward Verde Vista. I don't reckon we'll ever get 'em out of Mexico, but we'll give the boys the job of gettin' 'em back all here."

The tall sorrel didn't want to buck, but he did want to run, and Tombstone had some difficulty getting the animal convinced that speed, at this time, was not necessary. However, he managed to open the sagging old gate, and send the herd into headlong flight up the road.

Reining his horse in beside Homer, Tombstone said:

"Where-at was Slim Cantrell, while you was gettin' captured?"

"They got him first," replied Homer.

Tombstone cuffed his old hat over one eye and stared straight ahead.

"Why?" he asked.

"They didn't tell me."

"Was they goin' to hold yuh for ransom, Homer?"

"Ransom? You mean ask my dad to pay to get me back?"

"Somethin' like that. He would, wouldn't he, Homer?"

Homer thought it over carefully before he replied.

"My dad is a hard-headed business man, Jones," he said then. "He wants value received in any deal. No, I don't believe he'd pay."

"Well, he knows yuh better than I do," said Tombstone drily. . . .

IN THE meantime Speedy Smith was not enjoying life at all. He had a cut scalp and an egg-sized lump on his head, which made him dizzy from the pain. He was also tied hand and foot on a bunk.

Speedy didn't remember exactly what had happened to him, and he had no idea where he was. Thinking only made his head ache. Several times he had a hazy remembrance that men had questioned him, but he couldn't remember what it was that they had wanted to know.

There was one window, rather high on the wall opposite the bunk on which he lay, but it was covered, so that little light came through. But the time of day meant nothing anyhow.

His head was clearing a little when two men came in, locking the door behind them. Speedy never had seen them before. One was a squat, mustached Mexican, gaudy with colors and silver. The other was a Chinese, nattily dressed, but not at all pleasant looking.

He had agate eyes, and he spoke English with only a little accent.

"You are able to talk, eh?" he questioned. "That is good."

Speedy looked the men over through narrowed eyes.

He didn't feel like talking.

"We wish to ask you a question," said the Chinese.

"Stop wishin'!" said Speedy angrily. "Yuh've got me where I can't help myself, so why wish?"

The Chinese smiled, but it was not a pleasant smile.

"I understand that you and your companion came to Turquoise City in a buggy," he said.

[*Turn page*]

Tired Kidneys Often Bring Sleepless Nights

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may also cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. (*Adv.*)

"Yore understandin' is limited to what folks tell yuh," remarked Speedy. "We didn't do anything of the kind."

"You are not in any position to lie to me."

"I ain't lyin'. Why would I lie? What's this all about, anyway? Why'd somebody pop me on the head and bring me here?"

"You didn't come to Turquoise City in a buggy, eh?"

"We shore didn't. Anybody says we did, lies."

The Chinese spoke Spanish like a Mexican, and he told all this to his companion. The Mexican listened, his eyes hard. They argued for several minutes.

"W'y don' you tell heem w'at we want?" the Mexican finally said.

"No!" snapped the Chinese. "Later, perhaps, but not now. Either we have been doublecrossed, or this man is lying. We will find out."

"How about some water and a little food?" asked Speedy.

The Chinese laughed at him.

"A little hunger, a little thirst may make you tell the truth—later."

They went out then and locked the door behind them. Speedy tried to loosen his hands, but they were bound with small maguey rope that was like steel cable. He finally gave up the effort and went to sleep.

CHAPTER V

Prisoners and Such

LANKY Tombstone and Homer the Second were having little trouble keeping the loose horses on the old road. The horses seemed to have a homing instinct.

"How'd it happen that yuh got knocked stiff the other night?" Tombstone said to Homer.

"I don't know," replied Homer. "I guess I was pretty drunk, and going fast. Slim said we hit something, but I'm not sure of anything."

"I heard it killed yore hoss."

"I heard the same thing, Tombstone. But I'm not sure."

It was evident that Homer the Second did not know what he had run into, and neither did he say anything about the loss of his saddle.

The bunch of horses were well strung out along the road, traveling at a fairly good pace. The tall sorrel under Tombstone seemed to be walking on air, wanting to run some more, but Tombstone kept the animal in check.

"We'll never get this remuda past Verde Vista," he said. "Our best bet is to circle the town and head for the Border. And yore best bet is to stay home, my boy."

"I'm free, white and twenty-one," declared Homer.

And just then the horses all disappeared around a curve in the road. And as Tombstone and Homer swung around it, five armed men stepped into the road just in front of them. One man flung up his left hand.

"Alto ahi! Alto ahi!" he yelled, and Tombstone knew enough Spanish to know that meant, "Stop there!"

The five men were not over twenty feet away, walking toward them. Tombstone swung low over his horse's neck. "C'mon, kid!" he yelled, and drove the rowels into that highbred horse.

It was like releasing an arrow from a bow. The five men had no chance to dodge before that sorrel crashed into them, sending three of them spinning, the other two diving aside, yelling.

The next curve was not over a hundred yards ahead, and Tombstone was going around it, swinging out at an angle of forty-five degrees, in order for the horse to keep its feet when two bullets sang over his head. He looked back to see if Homer the Second was following, but too late. He rode a quarter of a mile further on, slowed to a stop and waited, but Homer didn't come. The herd of horses was far ahead now, throwing up a cloud of dust as they galloped for Verde Vista.

But Tombstone was not going to run the gauntlet of Verde Vista. He swung into the hills above the town, came in past some old adobe barracks, and found a trail about halfway up the hill, heading north. After he passed Verde Vista he could see the winding old road below him, and those horses surely heading for the Border at breakneck speed. They had evidently gone straight through the town, sticking to the main road.

Two cowboys were following them, riding full speed, trying to overtake the herd, but those loose horses were not going to let anyone pass them on that narrow road. A few hundred yards from the old gate at the Border, both men drew up and went back.

Tombstone shoved his horse down through the brush to the road and came in behind the herd. The gate was open and four riders

were on the American side. One of them started to close the gate, but changed his mind, and the horses raced through.

Tombstone came galloping through the gateway and drew up.

"Old Hack-saw Jones hisself!" one of the riders said.

Tombstone leaned wearily on his saddle-horn and grinned.

"Hyah, El-mer," he said.

Homer G. Gates was one of the riders and he was so excited that he could hardly talk.

"But I tell you, Sheriff, those are my missing horses!" he yelled. "Coming out of Mexico, too! You saw them!"

"Yeah," admitted Dan O'Leary, the sheriff, eyeing Tombstone.

"They're our hosses all right," said a cowboy.

"Now that that's settled," sighed Tombstone, "howdy, folks."

"You are Jones!" exclaimed Homer G. Gates.

"What am I supposed to do—get excited?" asked Tombstone. "I've knowed that ever since I was knee-high to a tall Injun."

"And Uncle Sam didn't get no duty on them hosses," said Dan O'Leary.

"Never mind the duty—I'll pay that," said Gates. "Jones, where on earth did you find my horses?"

"Find 'em?" queried Tombstone. "Huh! That's funny. I was ridin' along the hill and I seen 'em down on the road. So I went down to the road—and here I am."

HOMER. G. GATES looked puzzled.

"Mr. Gates," Dan O'Leary said, "yuh might as well give up yore crazy idea and go back home."

"The idea is not crazy—and I shall not go home!"

"What's eatin' him, Elmer?" asked Tombstone.

"Well, yuh see," replied Elmer, "he's got a son, which ain't been home for a couple days. He thinks he's in Verde Vista, so he's goin' over there and bring him home."

"What do you think about it, Jones?" asked the sheriff.

Tombstone looked over the little fat man and shook his head.

"I don't need your opinion, sir!" snapped Homer G. Gates.

"Then I won't give it to yuh," said Tombstone.

"Sa-a-ay!" snorted the sheriff. "You wasn't over there, packin' yore gun in sight thataway, was yuh, Jones?"

"I was lookin' for my pardner," replied Tombstone quietly. "Somebody knocked him down in our room last night, and packed him away, so I came a-lookin' for him. I wasn't worryin' about what they'd do about my gun."

"Yuh mean somebody knocked Speedy down and took him?" asked Elmer. "We didn't know that."

Tombstone nodded. Homer G. Gates turned to his cowboy.

"Johnny," he said, "you take those horses back to the ranch. I'm going to Verde Vista. You tell Mrs. Gates that I shall be home soon."

Then the fat man, who had more money than brains, rode through the gateway and headed for Verde Vista. The cowboy shrugged his thin shoulders.

"I just work for him," he said, and reined around to follow the horses.

Dan O'Leary gestured wearily.

"What can yuh do with a feller like him?" he asked. "He's been the boss all his life, and he's still bossin'. If he wants to go to Verde Vista, it's his business, I reckon. I'd like to know where them hosses come from. They're his hosses, that's a cinch. He knew 'em right away."

"All but one," said Tombstone soberly.

"What do you mean?" asked the sheriff.

"The one I'm a-ridin'."

"One of his hosses?" gasped Elmer. "Where'd yuh get that sorrel hoss, Tombstone?"

"Oh, I just borrowed it out of a corral in Mexico, Elmer."

"Yea-a-ah? One of Gates' hosses and you borrowed it, eh? Tombstone, you brought them hosses. Go ahead with the story."

"Well," replied Tombstone soberly, "once upon a time there was three little pigs. The mamma pig said to the little—"

"Where did yuh find them hosses?"

"Wee-e-ell, I just looked—and there they was."

"Jones," Dan O'Leary said, "did yuh see Gates' son?"

"Homer the Second? He rode my hoss. That's why I'm ridin' this sorrel."

"He—rode—yore—hoss," said O'Leary, spacing his words carefully. "You took one of his father's hosses. I see. But what became of Homer the Second?"

"Oh, him!" Tombstone grinned slowly. "Well, sir, we ran into an ambush. Five men, blockin' the road, but this here skittish critter busted plumb through 'em, prob'ly cripplin' some of 'em. Me and the sorrel got away, but I'm scared they got Homer."

Dan O'Leary began enumerating the dif-

ferent points on his fingers, his eyes squinted thoughtfully.

"Yuh found the hosses in Mexico, gave yore hoss to Homer, ran into an ambush, and—"

"Like I said," added Tombstone, "there was three little pigs."

"And the biggest liar that ever came out of New Mexico," added Elmer.

"Likely," growled the sheriff. "Jones, did yuh see Slim Cantrell down in Verde Vista?"

Tombstone shook his head.

"I was lookin' for Speedy, yuh know."

"We just came down from Turquoise City," said Elmer, "and he wasn't there. I asked for yuh at the hotel, and Old Jim said neither of yuh was there last night."

"Why would anybody kidnap Speedy?" asked O'Leary.

"Well, I reckon they'll ask me for some ransom money."

"Ask you?" gasped Elmer. "You ain't got no money."

"I ain't? That's all you know—Oh, my gosh!"

TOMBSTONE cuffed his hat over one eye, and stared at them.

"They kidnaped him for his money!" he exclaimed. "Speedy had almost three thousand pinned inside his shirt. That's what they done!"

"Why didn't they just take his shirt?" asked Elmer.

"Well, yeah, they—Nope! They wouldn't have to hold him for ransom, 'cause they could just take that three thousand."

"Where did he get three thousand dollars?" asked the sheriff curiously.

"From me," replied Tombstone. "I split six thousand with him."

"Let's go home, Elmer," said the sheriff huskily. "Mebbe it's the heat—I don't know."

"Are you goin' to Turquoise City, Tombstone?" asked Elmer.

"No, I don't reckon so. I just got to thinkin' about Homer G. Gates. He's crazy to go down there. Homer the Second told me that Slim Cantrell is a prisoner, and now I reckon they've got Homer the Second. Yuh can't never tell what they'll do to papa. Maybe I better go down there and kinda help him out."

"They've got Slim Cantrell a prisoner, too?" asked Elmer.

"Homer the Second told me." Tombstone nodded.

Elmer squinted at Dan O'Leary thoughtfully. Finally he unpinned his deputy sheriff's badge and handed it to the sheriff.

"I ain't had no fun for ages," he said wistfully. "If yuh don't mind, Dan, I'd kinda like to go along."

"Yuh're crazy, Elmer," declared the sheriff.

"I know it blamed well, Dan. But it seems to me that there's too danged many detained *Americanos* down there for one man to handle alone. Yuh won't be mad, Dan?"

"Lookin' at it thata way—no, Elmer. If I wasn't a married man, with a family to support— But you go ahead. I'll be in Turquoise City for a few days. *Vaya con Dios, amigo.*"

The sheriff turned and rode back toward Turquoise City. Tombstone watched him for a while, before turning his sorrel around.

"What was that he said in Spanish, Elmer?" he asked.

"*Vaya con Dios?* That means, 'Go with God.'"

"Huh!" grunted Tombstone. "That's funny. I never knowed he liked me, Elmer."

CHAPTER VI

The "Brainy" Tall One

HOMER G. GATES went straight to Verde Vista and tied his horse beside *La Golondrina Cantina.* He had never been in Verde Vista before, knew little about the Border towns in general, and did not understand a word of Spanish.

His entrance in to the *cantina* caused a decided silence. Every eye was turned upon the short, squat, perfectly groomed man, as he walked deliberately up to the long bar. The men looked at each other, but made no remarks. The bartender looked inquiringly at Homer G. Gates.

"*Si, senor?*" he said.

"I am looking for my son," said Homer G. Gates firmly.

"Your son, senor? Do I know heem?"

"Homer G. Gates, the Second," said the father stiffly.

"Poco" Topete, watching a poker game, heard the name and came up to the bar. Topete was all smiles. He even bowed.

"You look for 'Omer Gates?" he asked. "I am Topete. Come—we weel spik quietly from each other."

Homer G. Gates followed Topete over to the bottom of the stairs.

"Senor, I weesh from talk een private weeth you," Topete said. "The boy he ees gots leetle beet too *mucho vino*. He ees all right, you onnerstand. We weel go opstairs to heem, eh?"

"I want to see him, sir. The young fool needs to be taught a lesson."

They went up the stairs, down a narrow hallway, where a *mestizo* lounged against the corner. Topete spoke to him sharply, and the man unlocked a door. Homer G. Gates didn't realize that this man was a guard. He followed Topete into the room, and the *mestizo* came in behind Homer G. Gates, closing and locking the door.

It was a big room, originally used for gambling. A single lamp was burning at its far end, on the rock mantel of a big fireplace.

There were four people in the room, all sitting in chairs. But before Homer G. Gates had any chance to ask a question, or really see who the four men were, Topete and the guard grabbed and roped him. They hustled him to an empty chair, where they proceeded to tie his feet securely. He saw then that the other four men in chairs were Speedy Smith, Homer G. Gates the Second, Slim Cantrell and Jim Brant, a cowboy from Gates' own ranch, the cowboy who had been with Homer and Cantrell when they had run into the buggy.

The elder Gates tried to voice a protest, but a dirty rag was shoved between his teeth, and the protest was choked off. Poco Topete seemed well satisfied, but Topete wasn't taking any chances. He ordered the guard to stay in the room and keep the door shut.

Then Topete went back down into the *cantina* to drink a lot of *tequila* and figure out just what good Homer G. Gates might be to him. Homer G. Gates had plenty money, and Topete was not adverse to getting money, no matter how he got it.

He met "Diamond Charley" Wong in the *cantina*, and told the Chinese what he had done. Charley didn't like it. Smuggling was one thing; kidnaping was something else.

"I don' keednaps heem, Charley," Topete said. "He come here heemselves."

"A difference without a distinction," said Charley. "You are a fool, Topete. Too many mistakes have been made now. Gates is a very rich and influential man. You have a good business here now, but a foolish move like that might ruin everything."

"*Por Dios*, I can' turn heem loose now, Charley! He know too much."

"That's true. Your job is to watch out for Smith's partner—the tall one. He took that fat fool of a kid from the ranch, along with the horses. He will know all the kid knows—and that tall one is not a prisoner."

"Bah!" snorted Topete. "He come here, Topete weel tak' care from heem. I have plenty guard watch the place. Nobody can get een."

Charley lowered his voice, speaking carefully.

"Where is Stone?"

Topete grinned wisely. "Een hees room, sleeping. I have guard een the hall by hees door. He don' know he ees preesoner."

"Good. Close the *cantina* at nine o'clock tonight. Then we will find out the truth. With the *cantina* closed and locked, no one can interrupt. But don't forget the tall one."

"For heem, I weel watch," assured Topete.

"And don't forget Stone."

Topete grinned.

"Stone dreenk leetle powder een hees *tequila*. He weel sleep late, *amigo*."

"Good! If they want to live, they will not lie. . . ."

TOMBSTONE JONES and Elmer Higgins rode back into Mexico, without the slightest idea where to go nor what to do. They sat their horses in the brush on the hill slope above the town, and debated their moves. They also wanted to watch and see if Homer G. Gates went back to the Border.

After watching for an hour, Tombstone said:

"I'm scared he ain't comin' out of there, Elmer."

"After what yuh've told me, I ain't amazed," replied Elmer. "But all this capturin' don't make sense, Tombstone. Speedy ain't done nothin' to be captured for. And why would they capture Slim Cantrell and Homer the Second? Topete ain't never been noted for his brains, but this here deal looks loco."

"And now they've got Homer's pa," added Tombstone.

"It shore looks like it. Now what do we do, Tombstone?"

"I don't know, El-mer," drawled Tombstone helplessly. "We've got to use brains in this deal."

"If that's true, we better both go back home."

"I'll tell yuh what we'll do," said Tombstone. "Let's ride down to that *rancho*. Mebbe they took Homer the Second back there."

"Well, I'd like to save somebody that was worth while, but we've got to do somethin'. Go ahead—I'll trail yuh."

They struck the road south of Verde Vista,

and headed for the ranch. Tombstone showed Elmer where he had made his getaway past the men. They rode on to the ranch and circled it carefully, but saw no signs of life, and finally rode in close to the house.

No one answered their hail. So they dismounted, stalked to the door and shoved it open and went in, guns ready. In the main room, lying on the bunk where Tombstone found Homer the Second, was the *mestizo* whom Tombstone had pitched against the house. He was wrapped in a blanket, reeking of horse liniment. Tombstone shook him and he blinked at them, grunted, and went back to sleep.

"Yuh must have bounced him awful hard," remarked Elmer.

"I didn't hold back, if that's what yuh mean. He almost got me with his knife."

They searched the place, but the *mestizo* was the only inhabitant.

A search of the larder disclosed a hunk of roasted meat, a few cans of beans and some elderly tortillas. They took most everything in sight and retired to the brush to eat and watch the place. As Tombstone explained:

"We ain't got no business in Verde Vista in the daytime, and this is as good a place to set as any other."

"And what do we do there after dark?" asked Elmer.

"Use our brains."

"Both of us?"

"Better let me do the thinkin'," said Tombstone. "I'm awful good at gettin' a idea once in a while."

"Like havin' a hack-saw blade sewed into yore chaps, eh?"

"That was a good one," chuckled Tombstone.

"Still wearin' one?"

"Not since I turned law-abidin', El-mer."

They watched the place until dark, but no one came. So they mounted their horses and headed for Verde Vista. It was about eight o'clock when they had hidden their horses and worked their way to a strategic place on the main street. There seemed to be quite a lot of activity in *La Golondrina*, but they were a little afraid to go into the place.

"If we get caught," said Tombstone, "there won't be nobody left to help anybody. If Speedy's in that blasted dump, I'll get him out—some way."

"Yeah," agreed Elmer dubiously, "yuh might. Do yuh notice there's a feller in front of the *cantina*, and one over by the hitch-rack? They ain't moved none since we came here. They're guards."

"Guardin' what?"

"They're posted out there to see that we don't get in."

"Well, wouldn't that hold a post-mortem on a polecat!" exclaimed Tombstone. "Imagine the nerve of them jaspers! Yuh'd think we had smallpox, or somethin'. It's a free country, ain't it, El-mer?"

"Nope—this is part of Mexico. It may be free to Mexicans but not to a feller from over the Border."

"Yea-a-a-ah, that's right," breathed Tombstone. "C'mon, we can't do no good here."

They circled around the town, crossed the street about two blocks below the *cantina*, where there were no lights, and came around to the rear of the *cantina* where Tombstone had seen them put Homer the Second on a horse. From the rear corner they could see the long hitch-rack, well filled with horses, but the guard was not visible.

THERE were three windows on the second floor, and as they started to work their way along the old adobe wall, they heard a scraping sound above them. Tombstone jerked upright, looking up. In the darkness he could see a man sliding out of a window, swinging down at full arm's-length.

Tombstone shoved Elmer ahead and leaped back, just as the man hit the ground. The man landed on his feet, face to the wall, but went backward on the seat of his pants, emitting a decided, "Woosh!" as the wind left his lungs.

The man was not knocked out, but he was badly dazed, as he tried to get back on his feet. Tombstone grabbed him by the arm, but the man suddenly jerked away and started running back toward the old stable. Neither Tombstone nor Elmer knew what was just the right thing to do for the moment, but Tombstone took after the fellow.

The man reached the angle between the stable and an old corral, where he was trapped. And as Tombstone closed in, the man flung something at him. Tombstone ducked quickly and came ahead.

The man was all out of fight.

"All right," he choked. "Go ahead. A lot of good it will do you."

"Just calm down, pardner," advised Tombstone, as Elmer joined them.

"I was scared he might use a gun," Elmer said.

"If I only had one!" panted the man.

"There's a lantern lit in the stable, and the door's open," Elmer said.

They took the man into the old stable and looked him over. He was well dressed, ap-

parently from north of the Border, and his face was pale. He stared at them as though trying to place them.

"You—you're not one of—not of Topete's gang?" he asked.

Tombstone shook his head.

"We just about ain't, mister. We're here to find my pardner. His name's Speedy Smith."

"Speedy Smith, eh? You're Jones?"

"That seems to be the general opinion. Have yuh seen Speedy?"

"I know where he is, Jones. I'll make a trade with you. I'll tell you where he is, if you'll let me go. If they catch me, they'll kill me."

"I aint' tradin', mister. If yuh know where my pardner is, yuh'll tell, trade or no trade. Topete and his gang ain't the only ones who can kill."

CHAPTER VII

Doublecross

STARING at the long, lean face of Tombstone Jones, the narrowed eyes and long, thin-lipped mouth, the man who had escaped from the *cantina* decided that this was no time to trade. Elmer took a section of thin rope from a peg against the wall and handed it to Tombstone.

"Tie him tight," advised Elmer. "I'll watch him and the door."

"Why should I keep my mouth shut?" asked the man. "I don't know what you are going to do with me, but I—I don't owe Topete and the others anything."

"Yuh're gettin' smarter every few minutes," said Tombstone. "Now, where is my pardner?"

"He's upstairs in the *cantina,*" replied the man. "He's a prisoner, along with Slim Cantrell and another man. I was a prisoner, too, in a single room, but I bribed the guard to go outside and lock the door. They thought I drank doped *tequila*—the fools! If it hadn't been for you two, I'd have made a getaway."

"Upstairs in the *cantina,* eh?" growled Tombstone. "Just where?"

"You saw the window I came from? Next to that is a big room where they used to have the gambling concessions."

"How can we get up there?"

"You can't. Topete has the place guarded, outside and inside. My guard had to go down and get the guard away from the hitch-rack, before I could jump. It cost me fifty pesos."

"Yuh're a big help to our family," said Tombstone. "No way to get up there, huh?"

"Only through the *cantina*—and two men can't make it."

"Did they capture Homer G. Gates?" asked Elmer.

"Homer G. Gates, the millionaire? Not that I know of. They have his son."

"They got him today some time."

"That is impossible—they'll do anything. Topete is an ignorant killer, and Charley Wong is as cold as a rattler."

"What about the roof?" asked Elmer.

The man squinted thoughtfully.

"At the far end of the big room is a trap-door in the roof," he said finally. "It may be nailed down or fastened from the inside. There is none in the ceiling of the room I was in. I doubt if you can get in, but it is worth a try."

"We'll try her," said Tombstone. "And yuh better pray that trap door'll open, 'cause if we don't win this hand, yuh're in an awful fix."

They went outside and crossed to the low wing of the *cantina.* Peering around the corner, they were able to see the hitch-rack guard back on the job again.

"Hack-saw, old boy," Elmer said quietly, "if we don't come out of this alive, it'll be the first time I ever risked my life and didn't know what I was doin' it for."

"All I know is that my pardner's up there," said Tombstone. "If yuh're dyin' for information as to why, stay down here and try to find out. Me, I'm gettin' him first—askin' afterwards."

"Suits me," said Elmer. "Yuh're higher than I am. You boost me up and I'll give yuh a hand from above."

A few moments later the two of them sprawled on the ancient hand-made tiles which were like a mass of slide-rock. They had to climb up to the main part of the *cantina,* then work their way along the ridge to where they might find the trap-door.

"If yuh slip," warned Elmer, "yuh'll just sleigh-ride off the roof. I never knowed there was this much loose tile on earth. Go ahead, Tombstone. I'll be right with yuh."

Suddenly the lights of the *cantina* went out, and they could hear men going out of the place. There were some discussions and arguments at the hitch-rack before the men rode away. Tombstone and Elmer sprawled full length on the old tiles, wondering what it was all about. Finally all was quiet again,

and they resumed their careful crawl over the loose and uneven tiled roof. . . .

BUT though the *cantina* had closed, things were going on in that old gambling room just under the roof. The five prisoners were still tied up, helpless to move. Charley Wong was there now, along with Topete, who swaggered up and down the room, reeking of *tequila* and garlic. Two of the guards stood just inside the locked door, carrying rifles.

A fire had been built in the huge fireplace, and the flickering light made shadows along the rough walls. There was one lamp on the long table. Speedy watched Topete.

"If yuh had a spreadin' tail yuh'd look like a peacock," he remarked.

The rest of the prisoners didn't see any humor in the situation, and Topete didn't understand it. Charley Wong picked up an iron rod about the size of a pencil and three feet long, which he took to the fireplace and placed one end in the coals.

"Looks like he might be goin' to maverick somebody," observed Speedy.

"Shut up!" Slim Cantrell said nervously.

"Yuh're in a swell position to give orders, Cantrell."

"No use makin' it worse'n it already is."

"Homer the First, Homer the Second—and who comes third?" said Speedy.

"Do you think this is funny, Smith?" asked Charley Wong.

"Might as well laugh," said Speedy. "After all, I don't know what this is all about. Somebody tries to knock my head off, packs me down here and keeps me a prisoner, and never tells me why. I'll keep on laughin' till I know more'n I do now."

"I know nothing," said Homer G. Gates huskily.

"I'll say you don't," agreed Homer the Second. "Why didn't you stay home where you were safe?"

"Pick up yore loop," advised Speedy. "After all, he's yore pa."

"I wanted to find you, Homer," said his father. "Your mother and sister are worried about you. The Border officers came to your mother and asked her to try and keep you away from here. You know, you have been in bad company."

"Meanin' me, I reckon," said Slim Cantrell.

"I am beginning to think so," said Homer G. Gates.

Charley Wong had been listening with a certain amusement, but now he walked over and stood in front of them.

"As far as that goes," he said quietly, "Homer the Second *has* been in bad company. He has unwittingly been the carrier of a lot of contraband. But that is all past now."

"What?" demanded Homer G. Gates. "Do you mean that my own son—"

"Unwittingly, I said," reminded Wong. "Slim Cantrell is one of the gang, but it seems that his usefulness has ended. I am afraid that Mr. Cantrell has doublecrossed his companions in crime."

"That's a lie!" snapped Slim. "I never done it, Charley."

"You and Mr. Stone."

"If Stone told yuh—where's Stone? I'll cram his lies down his throat."

Charley Wong smiled.

"Mr. Stone is investigating, I believe. You see, he has thirty thousand dollars in the pot, and you have only the thirty head of horses you turned over to Topete."

Homer G. Gates turned his head and looked at Slim, but Slim did not look at Homer G. Gates.

"I will admit that you were tempted, Mr. Cantrell," Charley Wong said. "But your story is too thin. I believe you will soon tell the truth."

"What's this stuff all about" asked Speedy. "Yuh're accusin' everybody of bein' a doublecrosser, but yuh don't say why. Nobody has asked me anything except did I come to Turquoise City in a buggy. Since when was it a crime to ride in a buggy?"

Charley Wong turned from Slim Cantrell and stepped over in front of Speedy.

"So you did come to Turquoise City in a buggy, eh" he snarled.

"Nope," replied Speedy firmly. "We walked in."

"Oh, you walked— Wait a minute! You walked in, when your buggy was smashed. Am I right?"

"Yuh're right—for once in yore life. What's next?"

"Did you steal the saddle off that dead horse?" asked Slim.

Speedy took that question under advisement. No one could prove that they did, it seemed. He scowled at Slim.

"What saddle?" he asked blandly.

Slim took a deep breath and shook his head. Charley smiled. Topete asked a question in Spanish. Charley scowled, but finally shook his head.

"Have one of the guards bring Stone," he said.

Topete gave the order and one of the guards left the room.

"So yuh had Stone tied up, too, eh?" growled Slim.

"I am not taking any chances," replied the Chinese.

THE door banged open and the guard rushed in, talking explosively in Spanish.

"Gone?" Charley rasped. "How could he get away? Topete, where were your guards?"

Topete rushed out of the room, cursing in Spanish. Slim laughed.

"What is funny about it?" demanded Charley hotly.

"There goes yore diamond, Charley!"

"What do you mean?"

"Stone's gone. If he didn't have the diamond, why would he try to get away. He's got thirty thousand in the pot. Have a little sense."

"He hasn't that diamond," denied the Chinese. "I was there when that old saddlemaker sewed it into the saddle."

"So was Stone," Slim said seriously. "It's a dollar against a doughnut that he switched stones on yuh, Charley. Stone's gone."

Speedy laughed shortly, but his mirth was short-lived. The Chinese whirled on him.

"You got that saddle!" he rasped. "You know where it is!"

"Do I?" countered Speedy. "So yuh sewed a diamond into a saddle, and sent it across with Homer the Second. Makin' a smuggler out of a dumb kid. Then yuh lost saddle and all. Serves yuh right."

Charley leaned in and shoved one hand against Speedy's shoulder, looking him squarely in the eye.

"Where did you hide that saddle?" he asked.

Speedy's feet were tied together, but not tied to the chair, and when Charley leaned in close, Speedy kicked him on the shins with both boot-heels. It almost caused Charley to cry out. He staggered back, caught his balance against the table, just as Topete came in.

"Stone ees gone—*vamoso!*" he exclaimed. "Those guard ees gone! *Madre de Dios*, everytheeng happen!"

And just then, as though to add to the confusion, a three-foot section of the plastered ceiling let loose and landed squarely on Topete's head, knocking him to the floor in a shower of plaster flakes.

"Most everything happens," said Speedy drily.

Topete got up, gun in hand, his hat driven down until his eyes were not visible.

"Who heet me?" he demanded. "Who heet me? I keel sometheeng."

Topete had started ahead, clawing at his hat, when Homer the Second shoved out his bound feet and Topete fell over them. His gun spun along the floor, almost to the fireplace.

"Set 'em up in the other alley!" whooped Speedy.

Topete got to his feet, yanked his hat loose, and picked up his gun. Topete was mad, humiliated, dangerous.

"*Basta!*" Charley said.

Topete started a rapid-fire of Spanish, but Charley stopped him.

"This has gone far enough," he declared. "Smith, you will tell us where you left that saddle."

"Yuh're just guessin' I will." Speedy grinned.

"This is not a guess, my friend," said Charley. "I am not in the habit of joking about a fortune. That saddle contains the Flame of the Temple, which cost me every cent I have made in years. Diamond Charley Wong does not go broke—easily. Will you tell where that saddle is, or do I have to force you to tell?"

"I can't tell yuh where it is," Speedy said soberly, "because I hid it in a mesquite thicket. I'd have to take yuh there."

"I think you lie, Smith. In fact, I think that so strongly that I shall *make* you tell the truth!"

CHAPTER VIII

No Contraband—No Nothin'

CHARLEY WONG walked over to the fireplace and picked up the iron rod, glowing red for about three inches on the end. All eyes were on the evil-faced Oriental, as he carefully examined the red-hot point.

"There have been too many lies," he said harshly. "Some of you are going to tell the truth at once, because one touch of that point will ruin an eye."

"Geeve eet to heem!" exclaimed Topete, rubbing his sore head.

Charley Wong came back from the fireplace, carrying the heated rod, and stopped in front of Speedy. There was no question in the mind of the little cowboy that Wong, desperate now, would carry out his threat. Something had to be done.

"All right, Charley—I lied," Speedy said. "The saddle is in the storeroom of the Astor

Hotel in Turquoise City."

Charley Wong lowered the point, as he stared at Speedy.

"In the storeroom at the hotel, eh? No, no, my friend! That is a lie to save your eyes. Perhaps if I just burn a little design on your forehead you will remember the truth. Like this—Topete, hold his head. He is nervous."

"*Si, si,* I weel hol' heem!"

Topete had started to circle Speedy's chair when more plaster came down. Both Charley and Topete jerked back and looked at the ceiling where a whole section was breaking through. Topete yelled and tried to get away, and the next moment roof, plaster, rotten laths, heavy, clumsy old tiles came down like an avalanche. And on top of them came Tombstone Jones and Elmer Higgins, kicking, grabbing, yelping.

The crash shook the whole *cantina,* smashed the table on which the lamp stood, plunging the whole place into darkness. More tiles, loosened by the break-through, cascaded down into the room, and the room was foggy with plaster dust.

Speedy had a flash of the avalanche.

"Tombstone!" he yelled.

A six-shooter flashed in the dark. "*Madre de Dios*—the door!" Topete howled.

Wham! A sixshooter blasted from down along the floor, and a man cried out sharply.

"Settin' on my hands, and thought I was tied down!" Elmer Higgins complained.

"Don't light a match," warned Speedy. "There's Charley Wong and Topete, and two guards. They're armed, boys!"

"I'm glad to hear from yuh, Speedy," said Tombstone.

"Yuh can put a P.S. on that from me, pardner. Look out for the two rattlers."

"Here's somebody," said Elmer. "I reckon he stopped a tile."

"Get set, El-mer," whispered Tombstone, "I'm lightin' a match."

"Let 'er rip, Hack-saw."

Tombstone lighted the match, holding it as far from his body as possible. But nobody shot at it. Charley Wong was stretched out on the floor, a heavy tile leaning against his face. The door was wide open, and Topete was piled up just short of it.

There were some candles on the mantelpiece, and Tombstone soon had the place partly illuminated. He and Elmer swiftly cut the prisoners loose, all except Slim Cantrell. Homer the Second vetoed that.

"Slim don't deserve anything," he said. "He stole those horses, Tombstone."

"All right—he stays. The rest of us better get goin'. How are yuh, Speedy?"

"Oh, I'll be alive by mornin', I reckon. How are yuh, Elmer?"

"There ain't a inch of me that ain't skinned, Speedy. Me and old Hack-saw have crawled all over that blasted roof, lookin' for that there trap-door up there, but we didn't find it."

"We made our own hole." The bruised Tombstone grinned. He had a discolored eye, a swelled cheek and a cut lip.

"This here Chinese ain't goin' no place," said Elmer.

"Neither is Topete," said Speedy. "Somebody got him dead center. Lets' start movin', before any of the gang come back."

Homer G. Gates didn't know what it was all about. He seemed like a disinterested spectator, and they fairly had to shove him out into the dark hallway.

"You are Jones," he did say to Tombstone.

"It's really surprisin'," replied Tombstone, "but it's a fact."

They went down through the *cantina,* kicked the door loose, and went into the street. No one opposed them. Verde Vista was quiet. Perhaps the inhabitants had sense enough to stay indoors, when trouble broke loose at *La Golondrina.*

THERE were three horses in the stable, two of them belonging to Homer the Second and his father. "A hoss for everybody except Jim Brant," Elmer said.

"Don't worry about him," said Tombstone. "He pulled out as soon as we got out of the *cantina.* He was Slim's little helper."

"Do you mean he helped Slim steal horses?" asked Homer the Second.

"Wasn't he with you and Slim, when yuh ran into our buggy?"

"That's right."

"Cross his name off the list. C'mon, Elmer, we'll get our hosses, and Mr. Stone can ride double with me?"

"Stone?" queried Speedy. "Where-at is Stone?"

"He's tied up back there. I want him to identify that diamond we heard yuh talkin' about a while ago."

No one opposed the cavalcade as it headed north, until the riders got to the Border, where three of the Border Patrol blocked them. Al Stevens recognized Homer the Second, who tried to explain what had happened, but Tombstone moved in.

"Officer," he said, "most of this outfit are fugitives from a diamond. Up near Turquoise City is a saddle, hangin' in a mesquite thicket, and that big diamond is supposed to be sewed into the fork of the saddle. While

we're travelin' up that way, we'll try and explain how it got there."

"The Flame of the Temple?" asked Stevens.

"Things do get around," said Speedy. "We've got Mr. Stone with us, but he don't want to discuss it. If I was short thirty thousand dollars, I'd quit talkin', too."

"What do yuh think the thing is worth?" asked one of the officers as they rode north.

"Hundred thousand dollars, I reckon," estimated Speedy.

"Well, if it is, you can be awful happy," said Stevens. "Yuh'll get twenty-five per cent. . . ."

They found the saddle, turned it over to the officers and went on to Turquoise City. As they entered the Astor House, old Jim Shane arose from behind his desk and stared over his glasses at them.

His eyes shifted from one to the other, as he seemed to be making a mental count. The three officers had the saddle in the middle of the floor and were cutting the leather loose from the fork. Stone was sitting in a chair, looking sick over it all.

Al Stevens emitted a decided, "Ah-ha-a-a!" and came up with an object tightly wrapped in soft leather.

He took it over to the better light at the desk, and the others crowded in close as he unwrapped it. The object tumbled out of its wrappings, and they all leaned forward, staring at it. Stevens poked at it.

"Flame of the Temple!" he snorted. "That's nothin' but a hunk of glass!"

They all relaxed. Tombstone went over to Stone, who grinned sickly.

"Yuh tried to doublecross everybody, huh?" queried Tombstone.

"Why not?" asked Stone wearily. "They were all crooks."

Al Stevens walked over to Stone and looked down at him.

"All right, Stone," he said harshly. "Where is that big diamond?"

Stone smiled slowly. "You can't touch me," he said. "I'm in the clear. Ask Tombstone Jones where the diamond is."

"Ask me?" snorted Tombstone. "How'd I know?"

"When you boys caught me, after I dropped out of that window, I thought you were some of Topete's gang. I didn't dare have that diamond found on me, and in desperation I threw it at you, when you cornered me between the corral fence and the stable."

Al Stevens swore softly, as his two men quickly searched Stone, but found nothing. The man was evidently telling the truth. There was a commotion at the doorway, and in came Mrs. Gates and her daughter.

Homer G. Gates had been merely standing around dumbly, still not seeming quite to understand what this was all about. Mrs. Gates grabbed him with both hands, her eyes wide.

"Homer!" she exclaimed. "Homer, where have you been?"

"Why—why, my dear," he said huskily, "I —I . . . Well, I have been with Jones. It's all right. It wasn't a real diamond, after all."

HOMER the Second put his arm around his sister. "It's all right," he repeated. "Everything is all right. We'll go back home, and I will explain everything. Come, Mother —you and Dad."

The four of them walked out.

"Well, boys, I reckon that's that," Stevens said. "No contraband, no prisoners—nothin'. Good night."

The three officers walked out, leaving Stone in his chair, Tombstone, Speedy, and Elmer Higgins against the hotel desk.

"Well, it was a wonderful night, anyway," Speedy said, "even if we didn't get the reward. But, money ain't everything."

Tombstone had been staring thoughtfully, and he suddenly grabbed Speedy by the arm.

"Yore money!" he exclaimed. "Yuh had yore money with yuh!"

"Money?" asked Speedy blankly.

"Yore share of the three thousand! They robbed yuh of it. That's why yuh never have anything. Yuh've done lost yore half!"

"Wait a minute!" snorted Speedy. "I didn't either. Our money was all in that valise upstairs."

Tombstones' jaw dropped, as he visualized the emptied valises. "We've been robbed—both of us!" he choked. "No money."

"They was a telegram come for you, Jones," said Old Jim. "Here she is."

"You read it, Speedy. I'm too upset."

"It's from Jim Keaton, and he says: 'Ignore last wire to wait for man to contact you. He saw you and decided to handle the job himself. You should be broke by this time. Wire if you are through loafing and ready to work.'"

"Well," sighed Tombstone, "he done what yuh told him to do."

"What'd I tell him to do?" asked Speedy.

"Yuh told him to stop mind-readin' and get a crystal ball. Them things shore work."

Next Issue: Tombstone and Speedy in THE LAW OF AVERAGES, by W. C. Tuttle

An Arizona Ranger Novelet

LOOT OF THE

CHAPTER I

Not by the Rope

THE voice came out of the mountain silence, just as "Navajo Tom" Raine, Arizona Ranger, topped a tall ridge. Raine was already pulling back on his reins, intending to halt his magnificent blue roan gelding, Wampum, for a breather. But he halted more abruptly than he had meant to when he heard that voice somewhere behind him.

"Don't look around, Tom!" The voice came again. "Make out that there's somethin' wrong with your cinches. Listen to what I've got to say, but don't let on anybody's talkin' to yuh, because yuh're bein' watched."

Raine was alert, but not alarmed. Obviously the hidden speaker meant him no harm, since the fellow could have sent a bullet into his back instead of calling out to him. He leaned sideward from the saddle, pretending to be studying his latigo strap, then swung down to the stony earth.

On or off a horse, Navajo Tom Raine was a striking figure. Tall and long-limbed, he had the flat stomach and lean hips of a man who spent much time in the saddle. His chest was deep, his shoulders broad and square. His features were hawkish, lean-cheeked and dark, and his heavy black hair hung,

Navajo Raine Rides into Little Pine Ready

Looking at the swaying body, Navajo Raine knew the little man would never ride the outlaw trails again

LOBO LEGION

By JACKSON COLE

Navajo Indian fashion, almost to his shoulders.

The matched Colt .45s that swung against the Ranger's thighs in pliant holsters had turquoise-mounted grips, and a band of hand-hammered silver ornaments set with matched turquoise stones circled the crown of his black Stetson.

Yet despite his long hair and Navajo trappings, there was no Indian blood in Raine. His eyes, slightly narrowed now as they searched the crooked, bushy ridge about him without appearing to do so told that, for they were calm and green—the bright, alert eyes of a man accustomed to rubbing elbows with danger.

RAINE looped the left stirrup of his saddle over the saddle-horn, and loosened the latigo strap, head bent as if nothing else interested him.

"Thanks for playin' along, Tom." The hidden man spoke again. His voice was thin, raw-edged from nervous strain. There was desperation in that voice, too, as he went on: "I've been watchin' this trail four days, knowin' an Arizona Territorial Ranger would be comin' along. I'm shore glad they sent you, because mebbe yuh'll help me. Yuh figgered me out yet, Tom?"

"Yuh sound a heap like a little rooster I knew when we were gangly kids." Raine smiled faintly. "He was an ornery little

for a Gun Showdown with Lynching Hombres!

squirt, who nibbled moonshine whisky, used cuss words he didn't even understand, and bragged that he'd be the toughest, slickest buscadero in Arizona when he growed up. His name was Sime Benge. Last I heard of him he was supposed to be a member of Ike Sisco's lobo legion."

"Yuh couldn't prove that this Sime Benge gent belonged to Sisco's bunch, could yuh, Tom?" the thin voice asked tensely.

"I couldn't prove it," Raine admitted, busy with the latigo strap. "So if that's what's wartin' yuh, Sime, forget it. Ike Sisco scattered his men and went out of the bandit business when the Rangers got on his trail a couple of years back. Ike headed for the Border, but a couple of Rangers caught that big, tow-headed, yellow-eyed hellion this side of Nogales, and had to kill him. As long as Sisco's lobos don't try to operate again, the Rangers will let 'em alone."

"Yuh've taken a load off my mind by tellin' me that, Tom," Sime Benge said wearily. "But I'll have to have yore help, or somethin'll happen to me."

"What?" Raine asked.

"The same thing that happened to them three gents who was found hangin' to that bull pine on the south rim of Cemetery Hill at Little Pine," Sime Benge said grimly. "Yuh've been sent here to investigate them lynchin's, Tom. Only they wasn't lynchin's, because each one of them fellers was dead before he was ever left danglin' on a rope."

"What in blazes yuh talkin' about?" Raine said sharply.

"Yuh did come here to look into them three deaths, didn't you?" Sime Benge countered.

"Yeah," Raine admitted. "Burt Mossman—he's the captain and the organizer of the Rangers—heard that three men had been mysteriously lynched at Little Pine, and that the sheriff hadn't made any arrests. So he sent me to look into them deaths. Now, what's this about the three men bein' dead before they were hanged, Sime?"

"It's the truth, Tom!" Benge insisted. "I seen the bodies of them three men—Bart Murphy, Roy Fleer and Ott Shope. They got hung about eight or ten days apart, Bart first, Ray second, and Ott last. I seen each body while it was still danglin' to that bull pine on Cemetery Hill, and I sneaked into Elmer Grant's undertakin' parlor to look at 'em after they was laid out."

"How had they been killed, if not by hangin', Sime?" Raine wanted to know.

"A thin cord, or mebbe a wire had been used to choke 'em to death," Benge said gravely. "I've seen a feller or two strung up in my time, and knowed somethin' was wrong somewheres when I seen Bart Murphy hangin' from that bull pine. His neck wasn't broke, and the rope hadn't cut into his skin like it would if he had been hung by it."

"So yuh decided to do a little investigatin', did you?" asked Raine.

"I seen a thin crease around Murphy's skinny neck that no half-inch rope like he was hung with could have made," Benge informed. "So I slipped into the funeral parlor that night for a better look. The mark was there, all right, thin and deep. Only the skin had been scraped over it till it was mighty hard to see it. And it was the same with Roy Fleer and Ott Shope, Tom. They'd been choked to death, most likely with a piece of wire, then hung after they was dead."

"Yuh knew the three men who were killed?" Raine asked.

"I'd knowed 'em a long time." Benge admitted, but now there was caution in his voice.

THE Ranger's interest sharpened, and his lips tightened a little as he guessed at the significance of Benge's sudden reserve. But the Ranger's hawkish features showed no change of expression.

"Who did the three men work for, and who were their cronies?" he asked quietly.

"Each one of 'em worked for his ownself," Benge told him. "Murphy owned a farm out in Watchin' Man Valley, Fleer owned a feed store in Little Pine, and Shope run a blacksmith shop in town."

"And somebody choked 'em to death with a wire or cord, the way you figger it, eh?"

"That's the size of it," Sime Benge said nervously. "And unless I read the sign wrong, Tom, I'm due to be the next gent found hangin' to that bull pine on Cemetery Hill. Or mebbe a Little Pine merchant by the name of Vance Lang will be next. It'll be one of us."

"Why do yuh think so?" Raine asked sharply.

"Because we're the only two men left alive who own Watchin' Man Valley land that Eric Kell's Rockin' K cattle don't graze!" Benge said fiercely. "Kell owns two-thirds of the valley, and still he ain't satisfied. Him and that skull-faced Blake Newton he got elected sheriff are workin' hand-in-glove to wipe out all us small owners in the valley. The sneakin' sons got Bart and Roy and Ott, so—"

"Hold on a minute!" Raine cut into the

angry flow of words. "Yuh say Bart Murphy had a farm in Watchin' Man Valley. Did the other two men own land there, too?"

"They shore did!" Sime Benge gritted. "And unless you help me, Tom, I'll get what they got!"

"How do yuh figger I can help yuh?" Raine asked.

"Get the goods on Eric Kell and Blake Newton!" Benge said thinly. "You jail that pair, and my worries are over."

"So yuh think Eric Kell and the sheriff are behind the killin's," Raine said thoughtfully. "Is that just yore guess, or have yuh got proof to back it up, Sime?"

"Nobody but Kell would have any reason for wantin' us small owners in the valley out of the way," Benge declared, and added hurriedly, "Yuh've dallied here about as long as yuh dare, Tom. I glimpsed a rider on the ridge before yuh come along. I think he's still there in a stand of young pine, watchin' yuh."

"Where can I find yuh to hear the rest of what's on yore mind?" Raine asked drily.

"So yuh think I'm runnin' a sandy on yuh, eh?" Benge snorted. "All right, let it pass, for now. Lope on into Little Pine, Tom, and put up at the Cattleman's Hotel. Anse Bishop who runs the place is my friend. He'll tell me which room yuh're in, and I'll be there at midnight."

"Fair enough," Raine agreed. "But, Sime, I'd like to find out how yuh knew a Ranger was comin' in here."

"Shucks, it's all over Little Pine!" Benge retorted. "Sheriff Newton's fit to be tied, and swears he'll gun any Ranger who comes here and tries to make it look like he ain't done his job. Watch that fish-eyed son when yuh hit town, or—steady, Tom! Act natural, but hit that saddle and move on. The hellion on the ridge is standin' by a rock now, watchin yuh."

"I don't stampede easy," Raine chuckled.

"So yuh think I'm lying'!" Benge rapped out. "Just glance up the ridge, by that big, sharp-topped boulder—and get yore first sight of Sheriff Blake Newton!"

Raine looked along the ridge, and as he lifted his head a tall, thin man who wore a red shirt and an almost white Stetson dodged hastily behind a sharp-domed boulder. Raine went up into Wampum's saddle, his green eyes hard now.

"Sorry I doubted yuh, Sime," he said grimly. "Meet me at the hotel tonight, and I'll be glad to hear what else yuh know about this killer mixup."

"I'll meet yuh if yuh live to get there!" Sime Benge jeered. "That squinch-eyed sheriff knows yuh saw him, or he wouldn't have skinned around that rock so fast. And he's liable to slap yuh between the shoulder-blades with a bullet before yuh ever see Little Pine!"

CHAPTER II

Three Visitors

NAVAJO TOM RAINE was in Room Eighteen at the Cattleman's hotel, looking out and down on Little Pine's broad, clean street. His green eyes twinkled with amusement as they followed the stocky figure of the man who already had been pointed out to him as Vance Lang, hurrying along the boardwalk, coming toward the hotel.

Lang had just come from Lang's Mercantile, the largest and best stocked establishment of its kind in the town. He was tugging a narrow-brimmed hat down over a shock of thick, graying hair with an angry gesture, and there was anger in his bouncing stride, too.

Raine heard the faint bang of double screen doors as Lang came into the lobby downstairs. Then Lang's feet were on the stairs, pounding furiously up to the second-story hallway, and the next minute he was hammering on the Ranger's door.

"Come in!" Raine called, and stopped smiling when the door flew open, then was slammed shut behind Vance Lang with a violence that shook the room.

Lang halted on short, thick legs that were spread wide, shoved his hat to the back of his head, and put a clenched fist on each hip. He stood with head thrust forward above blocky shoulders, glaring at Navajo Tom Raine out of eyes that were as black and shiny as polished onyx.

"Yuh've been in this town three hours, Raine, wanderin' around like a lost duck instead of reportin' to me!" Lang accused, his voice shaking with fury.

"I stabled my Wampum hoss and looked the town over," Raine said quietly. "But who are you, and what give yuh a notion I was supposed to report to yuh?"

Lang's face turned fiery red as he dropped his fists from his hips and strode forward. But he halted abruptly, warned by some-

thing in the face and slowly narrowing green eyes of the tall Ranger.

"You know who I am, confound yuh!" Lang choked. "I seen yuh cut them green eyes at me every time yuh passed my store. I even motioned for you to step inside, but—"

Lang's voice ended on a growling note of surprise, as Tom Raine strode forward, one long arm shooting out to snatch the hat from Lang's head. He handed the headgear to its owner and motioned toward a chair.

"Sit down and behave yoreself, or get out of here, Lang," he said in a calm voice.

Lang did not sit down, but the anger drained out of him as he stared into the cold green eyes that watched him unwinkingly.

"Yuh don't sem to care whether I tell yuh about them three lynchin's we had out here or not," he said bluntly. "Is that why yuh didn't report to me, Raine?"

"You wrote to Burt Mossman, told him three men had been mysteriously lynched here at Little Pine, and that yore sheriff, Blake Newton, didn't seem to be able to handle the case," Raine said quietly. "But yuh may as well savvy now as any other time that Burt Mossman is the only man I ever report to."

Vance Lang did not get angry again. He studied the Ranger with his shrewd black eyes, and presently a faint smile touched his thin lips.

"So it's true, ain't it?" he said.

"What's true?" demanded Raine.

"That you think, act and even look more like an Injun than the white man yuh are." Lang shrugged. "But I reckon that ain't hard to understand. After yore famous dad, Marshal Fowler Raine, was bushwhacked and killed durin' the bloody Tonto Basin range war, yuh lived with the Navajo Injuns till yuh was a grown man."

"I was only a younker when my father was killed," Raine said gravely. "The men who bushwhacked him thought he'd told me their names before he died. They meant to kill me to keep me from talkin', but I gave 'em the slip and got into the mountains. I'd have starved to death if the Navajos hadn't taken me in."

"That's the way I've heard it." Lang nodded. "And I hear yuh was still with them Injuns, makin' good money as a mustanger and hoss raiser, when Burt Mossman asked yuh to join the Rangers."

"Speakin' of Captain Mossman reminds me that he sent me here to do a job," Raine cut in drily. "What can yuh tell me about the three killin's?" Raine paced back and forth while Lang told his story.

VANCE LANG began talking rapidly, telling much the same story Sime Benge had told Raine. But Lang made no mention of thin, deep grooves on the necks of the three victims, nor did he suggest that the men had already been dead when left swinging to the bull pine.

A cunning look came into his black eyes when he explained that all three men had owned land in Watching Man Valley, a few miles east of town. Raine nodded, for it was a valley he knew well.

"So there yuh are, Raine!" Vance Lang finished with harsh emphasis. "Murphy, Fleer and Shope were seized at night, drug up Cemetery Hill, and hung to that big pine tree. Me and Sime Benge are the only two livin' men, outside of Eric Kell, who own land out in the valley. Benge and me'll get the same thing the other owners did unless somethin's done. It's up to you to crack down before we do."

"So yuh think Eric Kell is behind the deaths of those three men, do yuh?" Raine asked soberly.

"Who else could it be?" Lang snapped. "Kell and that gunslingin' Blake Newton he got elected sheriff are the men yuh want. Kell wants all of Watchin' Man Valley, and has set out to get it. What more do yuh want?"

"Proof," Raine said. "All you've given me, Lang, is damagin' theory, which is a two-edged weapon, and danged dangerous to play with."

Abruptly Raine took two long strides that were as soundless as those of a cat. His left hand reached out, flipped open the door. Vance Lang yelped something in a startled voice, but Raine's green eyes were boring into two men who stood on his threshold. One was a burly fellow with craggy, blunt-chinned features and hard dark eyes. The other was thin, almost as tall as Raine, and had cold blue eyes that stared unwinkingly out of shadowy sockets.

The thin man wore a crimson shirt with a sheriff's badge pinned to one breast pocket, and held an almost white Stetson in one long, bony hand. He stood bent almost double, his face on a level with the spot where the keyhole had been before Raine jerked the door open.

"I hope yuh feel as embarrassed as yuh look, Sheriff," Raine chuckled. "Straighten up, man, before yuh get a kink in yore back."

Sheriff Blake Newton snapped erect, his bony face as red as the shirt he wore. He swallowed and tried to say something, but the words seemed to stick in his throat.

"Eric Kell, what do you and Blake Newton mean by sneakin' up on me and Tom Raine thisaway?" Vance Lang's voice was a sharp burst of angry sound.

Eric Kell's craggy face hardened, and there was fury in the black eyes that stabbed toward Lang.

"Me and Newton heard enough to know yuh was tellin' this Ranger somethin' about us," he said coldly.

"What Navajo Tom Raine and me talked about is our business!" Lang snapped.

"Raine, hanged if I know what to say after yuh've caught me snoopin' like this," Sheriff Blake Newton declared. His voice was amazingly deep-toned, coming from such a thin man.

"There ain't much yuh can say, since this is the second time I've caught yuh spyin' on me today," Raine said bluntly. "Or did yuh know I saw yuh on the trail this afternoon?"

"All right," the sheriff said sourly. "I was spyin' on yuh then, too. And I want to know who yuh was talkin' to out there, Raine."

"Yuh're the only person I saw, Newton," the Ranger said, truthfully enough.

Sheriff Newton's face went so tight Raine knew the man was raging angry, but somehow he held his temper in check.

"Somebody spoke to yuh while yuh was ridin' along that trail, Raine," he said slowly. "I seen yuh jerk to attention, seen yore hands go towards gun butts. Then yuh relaxed, got down and started fiddling with yore saddle gear. Mebbe yuh didn't *see* the feller, but he was talkin' to yuh from the brush. I know, because I rode down and looked the sign over after yuh rode on to town."

"What in blazes goes on here, anyhow?" Vance Lang yapped. "Yuh didn't tell me yuh met somebody out on the trail today, Raine! Who was it?"

RAINE moved back, let Kell and the tall, thin sheriff enter. Then the Ranger turned to face all three of the men in the room. His eyes were hard and bright, and there was a cold look to his mouth as he eyed them silently.

"Kell," he finally said, his voice crisp now. "You and Newton are in a sweat to know what Vance Lang said about yuh. You, Lang, are in a dither to find out what Newton knows about me talkin' to somebody before I got into town today. So suppose you three stay in here and have a friendly visit while I go see if I can find out who murdered three men in this town, then hung their dead bodies to that big pine on Cemetery Hill."

Raine saw the thunderstruck expressions on the faces of the three men before him, watched their eyes widen. He had slipped a key from his pocket as he spoke. He stuck the key in the lock of the door, stepped outside, yanked the door shut and turned the key in the lock in a single swift motion. Voices within the room roared protest, feet pounded as the three men charged the door. It shuddered as clenched fists and booted feet hammered on it.

"Stand aside!" Eric Kells' voice rumbled. "I can blast the lock off this door with one shot. We've got to get Raine and find out—"

"Yuh'll find out that bullets can come through the door from this side, too, Kell, if yuh start shootin'," Navajo Tom Raine called sternly.

He was grinning as he tiptoed toward the stairs. He could hear the three trapped men cursing furiously, and knew by the scraping sound of their boots that they were getting hastily away from the door.

From below came the sound of a heavy step, the soft squeaking of the stair treads. That would be big, fat Anse Bishop, the hotel owner, coming up to see what the banging and yelling was about. Raine swung around, tried two doors before he found one that was unoccupied and unlocked. He stepped inside it and closed the door gently just as the crown of Bishop's bald head showed above the floor level.

Raine moved softly across the room to a window, looked down into a long strip of dark shadow that was a narrow passage between the hotel and the adjoining building. He raised the window cautiously, then lifted a heavy rope that was there for use in case of fire and was neatly coiled on the floor and fastened to a stout iron ring on the wall.

Raine paid out the rope until it touched the ground. Then he went over the window sill and down the strong rope hand over hand, sinking swiftly but silently into the shadows between the buildings.

Striking the earth, he stood listening to the sounds of the town—the far-off barking of a nervous dog, the call of a woman to a youngster, the rattle of a wagon in the main street. No sounds came from inside the hotel that Raine had left, but he figured that by this time the proprietor had opened the locked room with a pass key.

"Now for a call on the undertaker," the Ranger said to himself softly.

His steps led him toward the main street, where few persons were treading the plank walks at this hour. Raine didn't want any trouble from them. He moved swiftly, his eyes alert for danger, but he found none.

CHAPTER III

The Watching Man

RAINE did not like the attitude of Elmer Grant, furniture dealer and Lone Pine's one and only undertaker. Grant, a loose-jointed, gangly fellow, sat slouched at a battered desk, looking up at Raine out of pale gray eyes that were set too close to a long nose.

Grant's only greeting was that cold, unwinking stare. He lifted a bottle of beer, drank noisily, and put the bottle back down on the desk.

"All right, Injun!" he said finally. "Either talk or start makin' signs. What yuh want in here?"

"You know who I am, Grant," Raine said calmly.

"Well, well!" the undertaker sneered. "So yuh think I ought to bow and scrape just because yuh strut into my store, do yuh, Raine?"

"I didn't strut when I came, and I'm not the kind of hombre who wants people kowtowin'," the Ranger replied evenly. "I just stepped in, Grant, to give yuh a little advice."

"When I want advice from you or any other man, Raine, I'll ask for it!" Grant snapped. "I've got my books to tote up, so unless yuh've got somethin' special on yore mind, drag yore freight and leave me be."

"What I have on my mind is special— and official!" Raine said bluntly.

Elmer Grant sat up with a jerk. His face turned red, and the pale eyes stared unwinkingly at the Ranger.

"Official?" he echoed. "What official business could yuh have here?"

"Don't try to leave town!" Raine said coldly.

Grant's mouth twisted in a sneer, but in his eyes was a flicker of uneasiness. He glanced uncertainly about the cluttered, gloomy furniture store.

"I've been in this town ten years," he said harshly. "What makes yuh think I'd mebbe get me a sudden urge to leave?"

"We'll go into that when I get back to town," Raine said firmly. "I'm goin' out to Watchin' Man Valley now, and have a look at some caves me and the Injun boys I grew up with used to know. While I'm gone, yuh better start thinkin' up some way to explain why yuh scraped the skin on the necks of three dead men to make it look like they died from hangin' instead of bein' choked to death by a cord or thin wire, which was the case."

Stark terror burned in Elmer Grant's eyes, and from his pallid lips came strange, whining sounds. Raine walked calmly away, but watched the man over one shoulder.

"Wait, yuh long-haired buzzard!" Grant's voice was a husky whisper.

But Raine paid no attention, but went on outside with a quick stride. He kept moving rapidly until he was past the furnture store windows.

"Phew!" he whistled then. He had a notion he'd had a narrow squeak.

A few minutes later the Ranger climbed over the fence of the corral behind the livery barn where he had left Wampum. He let himself in a rear door and was inside the barn, talking quietly to his big roan before Joe Seely, the stubby, shifty-eyed barn owner, spotted him.

"Hey, get away from that hoss!" Seely yapped.

He skidded to a halt on run-over boot heels, screwed his face into a fierce scowl, and looked Raine up and down out of bloodshot eyes that had a mean glint in them.

"Yuh ain't takin' that hoss out of here, Raine!" he said sharply.

Raine finished cinching the saddle on Wampum, then stepped out of the stall.

"I paid in advance when I left Wampum here, Seely," he said levelly. "Why can't I take him out?"

"Orders!" Seely leered.

"Orders?" Raine echoed. "Whose orders, Seely?"

"Quit givin' me lip!" the barn man snapped. "Peel the gear off that nag, and put it back where yuh got it. Badge man or no badge man, yuh ain't runnin' over me, Raine. I got orders to—Hey, let go of me!"

His voice ended on a high howl of alarm, for Raine's right arm had shot out, his hand seizing a greasy shirt front. Raine began shaking the scrawny, cursing man furiously. Buttons flew and cloth ripped, but Raine did not let up until Joe Seeley's head rolled loosely above his blocky shoulders.

"Who gave yuh orders to keep me from takin' my hoss?" Raine demanded.

"Sheriff Newton, that's who!" Seely gulped.

RAINE shoved him away, then turned to the stall and led Wampum out.

"Find Newton, and tell him I took my

hoss," he told Seely quietly. "Tell him I'm ridin' out to Watchin' Man Valley, but that I'll be back by dark or a little after."

He swung up into saddle and loped away, chuckling a little at Joe Seely's shrill cursing.

Raine swung into the wagon road outside of town, and turned his attention to the tall, wooded ridges that marched away ahead of him. He let Wampum travel at an easy gait, so it took the better part of an hour to bring him to the rim of Watching Man Valley. He reined Wampum to a stop on the valley rim, looking down the road that angled along a long, gentle slope.

The road split near the center of the valley, the right-hand branch, Raine knew, leading down the valley to Eric Kell's big Rocking K Ranch. The left-hand fork turned up-valley. Raine's sweeping gaze followed it. He could see three of the five small places that occupied the upper third of the fertile valley, and knew by the fenced green fields lying about one of the places that it was the farm Bart Murphy had owned.

Raine's gaze went on up and across the valley, touching the towering spire of stone near the valley's head that erosion had carved to roughly resemble the figure of a mammoth man. He touched Wampum gently with spurs ,and swung north along the valley rim instead of riding on down the road.

Within twenty minutes he had located the other two of the five small places. One of them was located almost at the base of Watching Man.

Raine quit the rim then and went down across the valley, his sharp eyes alert as he approached the base of the promontory above which Watching Man towered in majestic silence. The Ranger's attention was on the cluster of small, poorly kept buildings that marred the otherwise splendid scenery. A mail-box nailed to a crooked post had "Vance Lang" lettered in black.

Raine rode into the yard and hailed the house, but the only answer he got was the shrill whinnying of two horses in a little corral behind the ranchhouse.

Raine rode past the corral and on toward the steep, brushy slope that lifted up to the rim-rock above, studying the surrounding country attentively. He dismounted in a stand of tall young pine a half-mile from Lang's corral, dug a pair of Indian moccasins from a saddle-pocket, exchanged his boots for them, and toiled up the rough, steep slope afoot, studying the ground he covered with the utmost care.

Within half an hour his shirt was clinging wetly to his powerful shoulders, and his breath came in whistling gulps. But the Ranger had found what he hoped to find—a narrow trail that had been cut through the tough brush. Raine's eyes gleamed with satisfaction as he turned into the trail—more like a tunnel, since only the lower branches had been chopped away to make a passage through the heavy thickets.

"Darned clever!" he panted. "Anybody lookin' down from the rim-rock, or up from the valley floor, would never know there was a trail here."

He began struggling up the trail, bent almost double, even dropping to hands and knees at times. He was nearing the base of the towering stone bluff that ran straight up to where the Watching Man stood guard, when he heard a stone fall.

Raine froze instantly, trying to hold in his laboring breath, but with little success. He heard the stone come tick-tick-tick down the bluff, to land in the brush somewhere ahead of him.

It had been a small stone, such as the foot of a careless or hurrying climber might dislodge from a steep trail. And there was a trail of sorts going up that sheer bluff—a narrow shelflike ledge that slanted steeply up and across the face of the bluff. As a boy Raine had traversed that steep and dangerous path, and knew that someone could be coming down from the rim-rock.

He tried to get a clear view without exposing himself, but the best he could get was a brief glimpse of the bluff, rearing above him, pocked by cave openings that seemed to look back at him like sightless eyes. Most of those caves were small and shallow, yet there were a few which were large enough for a man to crawl into.

ONE, near the top of the ledge trail, was wide enough for a man to walk into, and was the first of a series of vaulted chambers that reached two hundred feet or more into the stone. Raine wanted to search that big cave thoroughly, for he had a hunch that in the cave was the answer to why Bart Murphy, Roy Fleer and Ott Shope had been killed.

Had someone guessed that he had seen through the smoke screen so cleverly thrown around those three murders? Had that small stone been dislodged by the scurrying feet of a man who had already committed three cold-blooded killings, and was in a hurry to commit another?

Raine sat there in the tunnel that had been hacked through the thick brush, every sense

alert. The towering bluff was, he knew, swarming with rock squirrels. They scurried over the ledges and along the crevices by the score, and it was possible that one of them had dislodged that stone he had heard come tumbling down. That explanation did not exactly satisfy him. He had waited all of ten minutes, then grimly resolved to waste no more time.

He went on along the man-made trail, but with such skill that no sound could have betrayed him to the keenest ears. When he came to the trail's end he stretched flat along the stony earth, waiting until his breathing became easier.

His sharp eyes studied the cliff keenly, following the ledge trail that started upward only a few paces from where he lay. And Navajo Tom Raine knew now that a man's hurrying feet had loosened that stone he had heard falling.

Nowhere along the face of the bluff was there a rock squirrel to be seen. They had taken to their holes, which meant that a man or men had come within range of their sharp, bright eyes. And boiling out in a wheeling cloud above the rim-rock, Raine saw bats fluttering dazedly about in the sunlight.

Someone had gone into that big cave. The bats coming out before the sun was down proved that. But how many had gone into the cave? Raine wished he knew.

"But there's a way to find out!" he mused grimly. "If I go up that trail without too much fuss—"

Easing his body out from beneath the screening bushes, he stood up, eyes hard and alert, hands dropping to ease the turquoise-butted guns in their holsters. Then Raine was moving, silent as a shadow, his moccasins making no sound as he stepped upon the shelf of stone that swung its narrow way to the rim-rock high above.

He moved more easily now, for the spiraling trail would not bring him within view of anyone watching from the mouth of the big cave until he was within a hundred feet of it. But nevertheless he kept his eyes on the ledge ahead, and his hands within easy reach of gun-butts.

A cave mouth loomed darkly on his right, but Raine barely glanced at it, remembering that it reached only a dozen feet or so back into the bluff. He was looking at a narrow strip of trail just beyond the shallow cave, where part of the stone shelf had fallen away since he had seen it last. It was still passable, but Raine realized that he would have to do some careful stepping to keep from falling.

He slowed down as he reached the narrow place, leaning close to the bluff. A quick glance showed boulders and stout bushes below the narrow spot. Then behind him suddenly came the whispery rasp of leather on stone, the hard gust of straining breath!

Raine backed off the narrow bit of trail with more speed than safety dictated, his hands ready to slap against six-shooter grips once he reached better footing. But he had only started to turn when something slammed against the base of his skull with a force that blinded him, robbed his body of strength. He felt hands clutch him, felt his ankles kicked savagely from under him.

Raine struck the ledge on his stomach, and a man's weight came down heavily, pinning him with a knee that ground punishingly into the small of his back. Raine heard a guttural laugh, felt a hot blast of breath on his cheek as his attacker bent above him.

THE Ranger tried to move, tried to free the guns he still gripped, but a fist smashed against the side of his head, sent his brain reeling toward oblivion. Then something cool and thin touched his throat, circled his neck, and lay quivering against his flesh. Before the cool, thin thing bit in, became a band of raw blaze reaching into every fiber of him, Raine knew that the thing was a wire slip-noose, the sort of weapon that had taken the lives of Bart Murphy, Roy Fleer and Ott Shope!

Instinctively the Ranger's hands flashed up, fingers clawing for the wire. But he was too late. The man on his back yanked fiercely, and the wire bit with all its murderous might. Raine's breath was cut off, and as pain and strangulation pushed his already shock-numbed mind closer to the brink of oblivion, he knew that he had but one slim hope of escape left.

And while the one feeble spark of reason was still alive in his tortured being, he whipped all of his fading strength into one single, arching motion of his body, flinging himself deliberately toward the edge of the stone shelf!

Faintly, as if the man were far away, Raine heard his attacker curse savagely. The wire bit with savagery into the Ranger's throat, but that one lurch had been sufficient. Raine felt the edge of the stone shelf slip beneath his shoulders, heard the man who had tried to kill him yell in rage or dismay.

Then the Ranger was hurtling out into space, the wire loosening about his throat. But below, jagged boulders beneath the stout bushes were waiting like bared fangs to finish what the killer had begun.

CHAPTER IV

Proof of a Prophecy

THERE was something eerie in the way the score or more of men just stood there beneath the big bull pine on the brow of Cemetery Hill. They stood without moving and without speaking, the yellow light from the half-dozen lanterns on the ground touching their chins and throats, but leaving their cheeks and eyes in shadow because each man's head was tilted back. Their eyes stared up at a small, wiry figure that dangled limply above them.

The hanged man's hands had been tied behind his back, and a thin rope knotted tightly about his booted ankles. The body swayed gently in the night breeze. And Navajo Tom Raine, seeing the narrow face and hooked nose, knew that Sime Benge would never ride the outlaw trails again.

Raine halted out in the fringe of shadows, his hard eyes dropping from Sime Benge's dead face to study the men who were looking up at the corpse. Sheriff Newton and big Eric Kell were there. And Anse Bishop was standing between Vance Lang and Elmer Grant, the undertaker.

Finally someone in the crowd moved, said something in a low, awed tone. Other men shifted then, and the tilted heads came down.

"All right," the sheriff said harshly. "We ain't doin' him any good just standin' and lookin'. We may as well cut him down, I reckon. But at least I got to see this one before he was cut down."

"He must have fought that noose pretty hard, Sheriff, judgin' from the way his neck is skinned," Elmer Grant said.

"Of course he did!" the sheriff snorted. "The poor devil's neck ain't broke, or his head'd be saggin' different. Them other three didn't have their necks broke either, and I remember their necks was scraped pretty bad, too. Of course they'd already been cut down from this durned tree and lugged to your funeral parlor before I got a look at 'em. But I do remember them skinned necks, Grant."

"Yuh're still sore because somebody didn't ride all the way out to Kell's Rockin' K and fetch yuh in to view them other three, Newton," Anse Bishop said. "As coroner, I ordered them bodies cut down, which was legal. I didn't send for yuh because I didn't see any sense in it. There wasn't a thing yuh could do. If yuh want to be in on what takes place here, why don't yuh live in town instead of out at Kell's ranch?"

Anse Bishop's voice was soft-toned, and his moon-face looked friendly enough, but Navajo Tom Raine wished he could see the expression in Bishop's hooded, dark eyes.

"Squabblin' won't get us anywheres!" Vance Lang barked. "Let's get Benge's body cut down."

The merchant seemed tense and jumpy, and Raine saw that the man was scowling, his black eyes flashing nervous glances at big Eric Kell and the sheriff.

"I can beat goin' after a ladder to get him down," a bow-legged little cowhand declared.

He hurried out of the circle of lantern light, and presently Raine heard a horse snort, and heard the squeak of saddle leather as the puncher mounted. Then Bow-legs was back in the lantern light, riding a big strawberry roan beneath the tree. The roan snorted and shied at sight of the hanged man, but willing hands laid hold of bit rings, and the horse was forced beneath the swinging corpse.

The cowboy stood up on the saddle, lantern light shone on a naked blade in his hand, then Sime Benge's corpse was being eased to the ground. The cowboy rode out of the lantern light, and the crowd watched in silence while the sheriff and big Eric Kell knelt beside the body.

"His neck ain't broke!" Kell's voice rumbled. "Anybody that'd swing a man up and let him just choke to death deserves a dose of the same, if yuh ask me."

Raine was coming into the lantern light now, and there was a medley of excited voices and stamping feet as men got hastily out of his way. Raine had hoped to watch the reactions of certain men to his sudden appearance, but there was too much milling around, too many voices muttering startled exclamations for Raine to keep tabs on any one person.

HE HALTED well within the circle of light, a ragged, blood-smeared apparition with a bloody white cloth wrapped around his hatless head.

Dried blood, looking as black as smears of tar in the lantern light, streaked the Ranger's face. And around his lean throat was a swollen ridge, red and angry-looking against his brown skin. Raine's eyes were like polished jade—bright, hard, cold. He

looked slowly from face to bug-eyed face, and his scratched, blood-caked hands were only inches from the turquoise butts of his guns.

"Wh-what happened to you?" Vance Lang's voice rose, thin-edged and jumpy.

Raine's eyes fastened on Lang's face as the merchant peered at him from the outer edge of the lantern light.

"Some hombre jumped me from behind, knocked me cold, and tried to twist a wire around my neck," the Ranger said flatly. "He got the wire pulled tight, and I wouldn't be here to tell it if I hadn't rolled over the edge of a cliff trail. I got skinned up some, but that don't matter. What makes me mad is that I never did get a look at the gent."

"That wire shore marked your neck, all right," Eric Kell declared. "And yuh must have been plumb on top of Watchin' Man's head when yuh fell, from the looks of yuh."

"I wasn't quite that high up, but I was out there," Raine said gravely. "How'd you know that's where I was, Kell?"

The big ranchman's face slowly crimsoned.

"Me and my big mouth!" he groaned. "So help me, Raine, I just mentioned Watchin' Man because that's the highest point for miles around. I reckon I was just tryin' to joke, which wasn't smart, seein' yuh're hurt. But honest, Raine—Hey, where'd yuh get that?" Kell's voice ended on a smothered yell of surprise.

Raine had stepped forward, pulling a piece of black-and-white-checked cloth from his hip pocket. It was the pocket from a man's shirt, and big Eric Kell's craggy face slowly turned from red to white as he looked down at his own black-and-white-checked shirt, the material identical with that of the piece Raine held. And on Kell's shirt a bright spot, outlined by torn stitches, showed where a pocket had recently been ripped away.

"Raine, I didn't have nothin' to do with what happened to you!" Kell declared, after a long, charged silence.

"We'll go into that later," Raine told him quietly.

He turned, finding Vance Lang, who had moved in closer. The undertaker and Anse Bishop had been talking with Lang in low tones, but watching Raine and Kell. Their whispering broke off abruptly when Raine glanced at them.

"Lang, lay hold of Sime Benge's shoulders," Raine said crisply. "You, Bishop, get Benge's feet untied. Get hold of one of his legs, and Grant can get the other. Three of yuh can lug him down to the funeral parlor, easy."

"Nothin' d[illegible]ang began. "I ain't touchin' him!"

"Shut up, [illegible] what yuh're told!" Raine barked savagely. "I'll bring up the rear, with Kell and Sheriff Newton."

Bishop and Grant were muttering darkly, but stopped abruptly when Lang said something to them in a low tone. The three of them lifted Sime Benge's light body up, and the eerie procession followed two bobbing lanterns down the hill.

Raine motioned for Eric Kell and Sheriff Newton to go ahead of him, and the big ranchman turned slowly. Sheriff Newton's sunken eyes burned into Raine's, and for a moment the bony hands of the sheriff quivered above gun butts. But he turned finally and fell in step with Kell, and Navajo Tom Raine heaved a sigh of relief.

WHEN they were finally in the square, grim room at the back of Elmer Grant's furniture store, Raine saw that Kell was drawn and white, but far from being cowed. Grant had lighted two big wall lamps, and the scrawny body of Sime Benge was stretched out on a table.

"Bar that back door, Bishop, before the crowd out there gets in," Raine directed.

"Bar it yoreself, after I go out," the moon-faced hotel man said in his soft, whispery voice. "Speakin' of bars reminds me I need a drink."

"Do what yuh're told, and no cussed foolishness!" Raine cut in angrily. "And you, Grant, quit lookin' at that corpse like you wanted to laugh!"

Bishop and Grant both whirled on Raine, swearing, and wanting to know who he thought he was.

"Shut up, both of yuh!" Vance Lang barked at them, and a keen sparkle shone in Raine's eyes when both men obeyed quickly.

Bishop barred the back door, and Grant turned his back on the corpse.

"Raine, I may as well tell you about that shirt pocket now, although I know yuh'll never believe me," Eric Kell said.

There was a moment of silence in the room.

The Ranger sensed that this was an important moment for the men. Some deal had been rigged up between them—or between some of them. And now they intended to pull it off. Rather, to pull the wool over Raine's eyes.

The Ranger stepped back, his face impassive. He always was a good listener, and he never was a better one than at this moment.

"Go ahead," he told Kell. "I might even believe you at that."

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CHAPTER V

Lobo Loot

VANCE LANG had been grinning faintly as he listened to what Kell was protesting to be the truth. Raine gave him a steady look, then looked back at Kell, nodding his bandaged head slowly.

"All right," he said to Kell evenly. "Tell me about it. But first, let me make a guess. I see a bruise on yore jaw, and notice yuh're wearin' yore hat tilted to the right, keepin' it off of what looks like a lump above yore left ear. So my guess, Kell, is that some gent caught yuh off guard, batted yuh to sleep, ripped that pocket off yore shirt, then left yuh to wake up and wonder what in thunder it was all about. Am I right?"

"Yuh're so right I'm a gone goslin'," Kell groaned. "That's exactly what did happen to me—when I was down at the barn right after dark, lookin' after my hoss. But since it was so easy for yuh to guess, yuh'll think I just made up a tale to keep out of trouble. Where'd yuh find the durned shirt pocket? Hung on a bush where yuh couldn't help seein' it when yuh picked yourself up after fallin' over the cliff trail?"

"I found yore shirt pocket in my room at Bishop's hotel," Raine said quietly."

"In yore room?" Kell echoed blankly.

"By golly, Eric, mebbe yuh tore it off this afternoon after Raine locked us in there," Sheriff Newton said hopefully.

"Nope." Kell shook his head doggedly. "That's the pocket I always carry my smokin' tobacco and cigarette papers in. I rolled and smoked three-four cigarettes this afternoon, and the pocket was there until that cuss biffed me, at the barn."

"Of course, Kell, yuh could have got that bruised jaw and the knot on yore head in a fight," Raine said drily. "And there shore has been a fight up in my room. Or did you gents upset things that way before yuh got out this afternoon?"

"We didn't muss yore room up none!" the sheriff snapped. "Anse Bishop come up and turned us out."

"What was the idea in tellin' Joe Seely I wasn't to have my hoss?" Raine asked.

"That fool!" the sheriff snorted. "All I told the knot-head was to send yuh down to see me before yuh pulled out anywheres. But what's this about somebody havin' a fight up in yore room, Raine?"

"Sime Benge was killed in my room tonight!" Raine said coldly.

"What?" Eric Kell and the sheriff cried in the same breath.

"Wait, Raine!" Vance Lang barked. "Yuh found Kell's shirt pocket in yore room, and the room shows there's been a fight there. Benge was hung to that pine on Cemetery Hill, so he wasn't killed in yore room. But mebbe he was caught there, then drug off to that pine where he was strung up."

"Shore—that's the way the killer wanted it to look," Raine agreed soberly. "But Sime Benge didn't die from hangin'. Neither did the other three men who were found swingin' from that old pine die from hangin'."

"Did that fall yuh got addle yore wits?" Sheriff Newton snapped. "Bart Murphy, Roy Fleer and Ott Shope shore as blazes did die from hangin'. So did Sime Benge, and if yuh'll take a look at that rope burn on his neck yonder yuh'll quit arguin' about it."

"*You* take a look at that rope burn on Benge's neck, Newton," Raine said gravely. "You look too, Kell. And if you two don't see the mistake Benge's killer made inside of a couple of seconds, then yuh ought to give up ever hopin' to tell a calf from a coyote the rest of yore lives."

Raine glanced at Vance Lang, who was regarding him out of thoughtfully puckered eyes. Anse Bishop was scowling, looking tensely at Lang. Elmer Grant fidgeted, making sniffling sounds as he watched Eric Kell and Sheriff Newton peer toward the corpse.

"So help me, Raine, I can't see anything but just a rope burn around Benge's neck," the sheriff said finally.

"Me, neither," Kell admitted. "That burn around Benge's neck is all I see, and that shore looks to me like he hung in a noose and fought till the life was choked out of him."

"Yuh've both said it, but can't see it," Raine snorted.

"Said what?" the sheriff asked testily.

"Yuh both said the burn is *around* Benge's neck," Raine reminded.

"Well, it is," Newton snapped. "Them other three who got hung to that pine tree had the same kind of rope burns around their necks, too."

"Shore," Raine said with slow emphasis. "All four men had rope burns right around the middle of their necks! But a man who fought a noose till it choked him to death would be burned high on the neck and up

under the jawbones. And you two ought to know it!"

"By glory, Eric, Raine is right!" the sheriff cried.

"Now go take a close look at that burn around Sime Benge's neck!" Raine said coldly. "Yuh'll find it ain't a burn, but was done by scrapin' the skin with somethin' sharp. And yuh'll also find that that scrapin' was done to hide a mark like the one yuh see around my neck—the mark of a thin wire that was jerked around Sime Benge's neck and kept good and tight till he died!"

ERIC KELL and the sheriff rushed toward the corpse, talking excitedly. But Raine was not watching them. When he had finished speaking, he had raised his gleaming glance to Elmer Grant.

The sharp-nosed undertaker tried to glare, but suddenly his nerve cracked, and a cry that was more like the cry of a beast than that of a man, beat against the walls of the room as Elmer Grant plunged toward the barred back door, one skinny hand yanking a gun from inside his shirt.

Navajo Tom Raine took three running steps, and all his weight and power were behind the fist that crashed against Grant's pointed chin. The undertaker turned a complete flip and came down like a wet sack, the gun in his hand skidding across the hard floor.

But Raine did not stop to watch Grant, for a gun roared at his right, and he felt the burn of the bullet across his side as he spun on moccasined feet, his own turquoise-butted weapons out and thundering into the echoes of the other weapon. Over against the wall, big Anse Bishop dropped a smoking gun, clapped both pudgy hands to has fat middle, and made little whimpering sounds as he sagged slowly down, dying.

Raine winced when another bullet took skin from his already blood-smeared face, but his hands were steady as he threw two quick shots at Vance Lang.

Lang's voice lifted in a high, thin yell when his smoking gun fell from numbed fingers. The merchant's right arm was broken halfway between wrist and elbow, but he dropped to the floor, cursing savagely as he grabbed the gun up in his left hand. But Raine was beside him, slashing down with still smoking Colt before Lang could palm the dropped Colt in his left hand and fire. The Ranger's chopping six-shooter thudded into Lang's skull, and the merchant stretched out, senseless, but still alive.

Raine stood up, pulled a deep breath into his lungs, and glanced at Eric Kell and Sheriff Blake Newton. They stood gaping at him, thin eyes as round as marbles. Raine reloaded his guns, dropped them into holsters, and sleeved blood from his cut and battered face.

"Thanks, boys, for the help," he said drily.

"What the blue blazes, Raine!" Kell gulped. "What got into them three, anyhow?"

"It's a long story, and I'm too blamed tired and stove up to go into it right now." Raine sighed. "Just jail Vance Lang and that Grant lobo where they can't see or talk with each other, then play one against the other. Grant's weak, so make him think Lang is accusin' him of killin' Bart Murphy, Roy Fleer, Ott Shope before and Sime Benge tonight. If yuh make Grant believe Lang is layin' the killin's on him, he'll talk."

"Lang killed them four?" the sheriff asked sharply.

"Shore," Raine nodded. "All of 'em thought Lang was their friend, so he could catch 'em off guard easy. He choked the four men to death with a wire noose, then hung 'em to that bull pine. Elmer Grant scraped the skin around the necks of the first three to hide the wire marks *after* they were cut down. But Sime Benge got hep to that, and told me about it."

"So it was Benge talkin' to yuh out there on the trail!" The sheriff said as he frowned. "But go on, Raine. Why would Vance Lang want to kill them four?"

"Did yuh know that all four of the men who were killed once rode in Ike Sisco's lobo pack?" Raine asked.

"I did." Blake Newton nodded. "Or at least, Raine, I was pretty shore they had. But what's that got to do with their bein' killed by that mouthy Lang buzzard?"

"Did yuh happen to know Ike Sisco?" Raine asked soberly.

"Know him!" Newton snorted. "Him and me hunted wild hosses together before he turned bad. He was a big, loud-mouthed towhead, swaggerin' and cocky as long as things went his way, but yeller as a mongrel dog when he got into a tight. I never have been able to figger where Ike Sisco dug up the brains and the nerve to get to be one of the slickest bandits this country ever knew."

"Ike Sisco never bossed the lobo legion he's supposed to have bossed," Raine said flatly. "He was only a figgerhead, a big-mouthed, two-for-a-nickel four-flusher who didn't have any better sense than to let the brains behind that gang talk him into posin' as the leader."

SHERIFF NEWTON looked toward the stocky, grizzled man Lone Pine had known as a successful merchant.

"Lang?" he said sharply.

"Lang." Raine nodded. "There's yore real leader of the Ike Sisco gang, Newton."

"But why would Lang turn on his own men?" Eric Kell asked heavily.

"When the Rangers killed Ike Sisco, Vance Lang knew that his days of banditry were over," Raine said calmly. "He didn't dare operate any more, and he didn't want to split up the rich cache with his remainin' men, so—"

"I've heard them wild yarns about the Ike Sisco gang cachin' every dollar they ever took in!" the sheriff horned in. "You don't believe no such tale, do yuh, Raine?"

Raine nodded.

"The serial numbers on the bills in at least two money shipments that bunch stole are known, yet none of the money has ever shown up. Add to that the fact that a brainy coyote like Vance Lang started killin' off his gang, and I'm pretty sure the answer is hidden loot."

"How about Anse Bishop and Elmer Grant?" Eric Kell wanted to know. "Yuh figger they was members of the Ike Sisco gang?"

"Grant and Bishop could have been members of the outlaw bunch, or Vance Lang could have talked 'em into some kind of a deal to help him get rid of the four men he killed." Rain shrugged. "The sheriff can get the answer to that when he starts workin' on Lang and Grant."

"If we could only find that cached loot!" the sheriff said tensely. "But Lang'll never tell where it is, because as long as he don't the law will likely keep him alive, hopin' to find all that missin' money and gold bullion."

"Then dust off yore best hangnoose, Newton," Raine said quietly. "We won't have to try makin' Lang tell where the loot is, because I already know."

"Where?" the sheriff and Eric Kell yelped in the same excited breath.

Raine grinned wryly. "The loot's in a cave, and I know the trail to it," he said.

"Tuck yore two prisoners in good, Newton, and see that a sawbones sets Lang's broken arm. Then you and Kell meet me at the hotel at sunup if yuh want in on a treasure hunt that'll keep every jaw in this country waggin' for the next twenty years."

"How can yuh be so blamed shore yuh know where that loot is hid?" the sheriff asked uneasily.

"Vance Lang showed me where to look for it," Raine chuckled. "He went into a certain cave today, and scared out a lot of bats. Then he sneaked down the ledge trail to jump me. He ran into that first cave to see if I'd found his cache. Yuh can bet on that. So meet me at sunup if yuh want to help fetch that loot to town."

Raine strode to the door and stepped quickly out, through with answering questions for the night.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

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Another Swift-Action Navajo Raine Novelet by JACKSON COLE

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HATED WIRE

By BARRY SCOBEE

Over the vast expanse of a huge Texas cattle empire, Ward Nickerson fights desperate foes as he takes up the quest of his missing pards and strives to solve a range mystery!

CHAPTER I

Lonesome Stranger

WARD NICKERSON sat alone with his bitter thoughts on the edge of a board sidewalk in the unpainted, dusty little Southwestern cowtown that was too far from any railroad ever to be more than a sort of hideout.

For the most of three days now he had waited, in the November shade and sun, for a man to show up. A little man. Just a little man without a name, so far as Ward knew what it might be. A man whom he must see before he could ride back to his little ranch with any peace of mind.

He knew the description of the man, would recognize him if he ever saw him. He had asked the three leading men of the town—the banker, the bartender, and the livery stable keeper—about the little man, and had got nothing but evasions. At least they seemed to be evasions. Anyhow neither the man of money, the man of drinks, nor the man of hay and horses was talking. Just being careful, maybe, with a stranger.

Hardly a soul was on the street this sunny forenoon. The barber across the way was giving himself a haircut in front of his mirror. Now and then the big cheerful bartender in the saloon behind Ward broke into song. A cowboy came out of the general store with a new shirt, unwrapped, and changed into it in an alley, throwing his old one away.

Then a rider turned into the street from the north. Ward's pulse picked up. For the man was small. He looked plumb little in the saddle.

He rode on into town and tied his horse at a rack on the street's south side and scanned the thoroughfare up and down warily. Removing his chaps he hung them on the saddle, left a big gun dangling from his belt, gave his pants a hitch, and came across.

The little man was on the shabby side, and the rabbity side. Not much to his small face. And the fingers of his left hand were stiff and bent and crippled.

Yep, this was the fellow Ward Nickerson had been waiting for. He gave Ward a furtive stare that was, oddly enough, penetrating. What he saw was a tall lean man with a straight nose, a man wearing the garb of the cow country, and idly whittling a match. Then he paid no more attention but legged his jockey body up to the high sidewalk, heel-thumped across, and entered the saloon.

So this was it, Ward told himself. His future right here in the present. Ten minutes to a half-hour that could shape the rest of his life, whether it be long or short.

Ward stood up, snapped his knife shut, dropped it into a pocket, gave his pants a hitch, and followed into the place of drinks. He had no gun, having with considered judgment left it in his hotel room.

IT WAS any saloon's slackest hour. Only the barman and the little customer were present. Ward pried at White Apron's face, half expecting to see a nod that this was the small man Ward had inquired about. But the bartender's big pleasant mug gave no sign. Ward closed in to the neat pine bar and looked down at the little man.

"'I'm a lonesome stranger," he said. "How about my daddyin' the first round?"

The little man glanced up, surprisingly

Ward lifted his knee, shot his right boot out against the man and shoved

quick and sharp.

"I buy my own stuff," he said.

White Apron grinned, and set out a quart bottle of beer. Little Man slid a quarter and a nickel carefully across the polished wood. Ward shrewdly perceived that there was no use to be coy, guileful or wheedling.

"My name's Nickerson," he said flatly. "What's yores?"

The little man poured into a glass, drank thirstily, then lifted his pale eyes up to Ward with that curious, furtive-hard stare.

"None of your business, mister, but it's Tyle—Albert Tyle."

"Thanks, Mr. Tyle. I'd like a little chin-chin with yuh, when yuh finish yore drink."

"You a Law?"

"No."

"What yuh want to chin about?"

"I can wait till yuh're through." Ward glanced at the barkeep. "Gus, how about using yore back room?"

"It's good enough for the Jack of Spades and the Queen of Diamonds," said White Apron. "Ought to do for you fellers."

Albert Tyle finished his beer regretfully, peered up at Ward, and jerked his head toward the rear. As they headed for the back room, Tyle looked at the barman, and slapped his six-gun.

"If I have to," he said, "it'll be in self-defense."

"No shootin' men in here," White Apron said humorously.

In the back room Albert Tyle slide sideward into a chair at the green-covered poker table, with his right arm and gun out in the open for free action. Ward took the opposite side, forearms on the table, hands in sight to show good intentions.

"Spit!" said Tyle.

"Yuh was workin' on Warren Abbott's Pig-in-a-Poke Ranch one year ago," Ward opened bluntly.

"Was I?" Startled fear darted across the man's small face, and was gone. "How'd yuh know I was here?"

"We'll get to that."

Thinking how to start, Ward became lost in the contemplation of far-off things, a lonely stranger in his own thoughts, seeing the colossus of a ranch called the Rod-and-Compass, but which men not associated with it sneeringly had named the Pig-in-a-Poke, or the Pig-on-a-Pole, because of its unusual brand. It was a vast sweep of land that blocked Ward Nickerson's life, other men's lives, women's lives; that made a woman look at Ward Nickerson with scorn; a ranch, and its fence, that made Ward afraid of—himself.

"Tyle," he said, coming back to the immediate, "Warren Abbott's outfit has a thousand square miles. His granddad started it. His father built it up. Now Warren Abbott has a six-strand barbwire fence around it with posts twenty feet apart and only one gate in all that fence. He's made an empire out of it. A nation all his own. All men are forbid to go on his land, except at the gate. Warren Abbott don't mix with local people. Spends half his time in cities. He's a state-wide big It. He's known in New York and Washington. The papers call him a 'patron of the arts' and a philanthropist. He—"

"I know all that bunk."

"All right. Six years ago I bought me a little twelve-section ranch against Abbott's wire. In the six years five men have gone through the wire and never been heard of again by friends or relatives. One of my neighbors is Dean Hysinger, which yuh prob'ly know. About a year ago his son got sore and went across the wire. He disappeared, vanished like smoke. You was workin' on the ranch at that time—one of Abbott's fence riders, or guards, or whatever he calls 'em. What can yuh tell me about Buddy Hysinger?"

"How'd yuh find out I was here?" Tyle demanded again.

"Fair enough, Albert. About two years and a half ago Lem Singleton vanished inside the Abbott country. He and his brother Bill had a ranch against the wire. Lem resented the fence, because it shut him out of God's free land, as he said. The fence does men that way. Once on a little toot Lem cut the wire and rode through. Never was seen again. It worked on Bill Singleton so much he sold out and went to Arizona or Nevada. The other day he come back, just to see if anything had ever turned up about Lem. On the trip he passed through this settlement. Saw you. Remembered yuh'd been on the Pig-in-a-Poke when Lem disappeared.

TYLE'S little face was pinched into a knot of anger, and contrariness, and half-doubt.

"Yuh're lyin'," he spat out. "Singleton didn't say nothin' to me—if he seen me."

"He's an old broke-up man, Albert. No spunk left. He didn't want to stir up the old mess, said he was afraid of yuh, as a killer. He told it all in a crowd of men. That's how I happened to hear. Somebody else said yuh was on Abbott's place last year when Buddy

When Ward looked up the six-guns of the two men were levelled at him

Hysinger disappeared. Abbott's men are tight-mouthed. They don't talk a-tall. But you not bein' there any more I thought yuh might talk. So I'm here. Didn't think of it till I was on the road that I hadn't asked yore name. So there yuh are, Albert. Now what can yuh tell me about Buddy Hysinger?"

"Bill Singleton called me a killer, uh?" Tyle snarled. "I ain't no killer!"

"Me, I'm not sayin' you are, Tyle. What about Buddy Hysinger?"

"What's yore burnin' itch to know?"

Ward stared out the dusty window. His fingers tapped on the green baize of the table. Presently his absent look returned to Tyle.

"I'll put all my cards on the table," he said. "When Buddy disappeared I was away from home. Up in New Mexico makin' a little money buyin' on commission for a cattle trader. Buddy'd been gone a month when I got back. Old Dean Hysinger and his daughter Worth thought I ought to dive into the Abbott country on the hunt for him."

"Yuh'd been a fool to try it."

"I knew that. Instead of goin' in I got hold of some half-political help, who got some high political pull, and they got the Governor to send out some State officers to investigate. They didn't find Buddy. Not even a trace. It has preyed on old Hysinger's mind. He's afraid of his shadow these days. All broke up. Worth sees her dad dyin' by inches. It makes her hate Warren Abbott. Hate that ranch. That wire fence. Hate me."

"She yore gal?" asked Tyle.

"No, no, nothin' like that. Just neighbors. Any man, though, you or me or anybody else, don't like to have the contempt of other men. Or the scorn of a woman. I think she believes I'm afraid of that fence, or of what's inside. I am, but not the way she thinks. I'm afraid of what I might find if I got inside and would have to tell 'em about—a grave, mebbe, or bones gnawed by coyotes and bleached white in the sun. Or the kid held prisoner till he's crazy."

Ward's fingers tapped a disconsolate march on the baize. Then he went on.

"I'm afraid in another way. That wire fence—when the sun is right it glitters and winks at me, glitters and smirks and mocks and dares me. Tyle, I'm afraid I'll up and go through some day. And that'll be the end of me." Ward heaved himself to his feet, stuck out an emphasizing finger. "Not that I'd give a hoot, Tyle, not one single hoot, if I could clean out that gang of killers, wipe out that ranch empire that breaks men, ruins

men"—Ward broke off. "And I'm supposed to be level-headed. Excuse it, Albert. What I'm afraid of, mebbe, is gettin' wiped out and leavin' Dean Hysinger and Worth there, alone and helpless. Yuh see what a stew men get into?"

"Yeh," said Tyle nastily. "Yuh put on a good show."

"All right, Tyle, all right. But what has Abbott got on that ranch that he's so bent to keep hid? What kind of murder mill has he got in his forests and rocks, his hills and canyons?"

The little man's face pinched tight in sudden terror.

"I ain't talkin'—I tell yuh I ain't talkin'!" he half screamed. He straightened to his feet, overturning his chair. "I got away from that Tophet—I ain't talkin'!"

Ward put all the persuasion he possessed into his words.

"Tyle, what became of Buddy Hysinger?"

Tyle snarled, and sidled around the table toward the outer door. He looked like a cross between a rabbit and a wolf. He laid a hand on the doorknob, the other on his gun.

"Nickerson," he said, "if you was the only man knowed I was here I'd kill yuh. To shut yore mouth. But looks like too many know it. There's men on Abbott's, they don't let yuh get away. Yore snoopin' will get yuh into it all. They'll be after me. I've got to fade away now. Cuss that crazy Bill Singleton! I've got to move on, be a shadder flittin' hither and yon, to and fro—cuss their souls!"

Ward stepped around the table, to the inner door. His hand found the knob. So this was the end of the trip. The seal on the future. He looked at Albert Tyle. Their eyes held, and held. Then Tyle spoke once more.

"Mister, I'll tell yuh this." He gulped his Adam's apple, horror in his little twisting face. "That Hysinger button was—was killed."

For a moment Ward stood staring at Tyle, as if numbed by this revelation. A cold wind seemed to sweep over Ward and chill him from head to toe. He wanted to speak, and yet he could think of no words.

"Killed?" Ward finally managed to say. "And tell me how the boy was killed?"

"I ain't tellin' no more," Tyle said.

"But you didn't mean to let it go with that much," Ward pointed out.

"That's all I'm saying," Tyle replied, edging back. "I'm no fool."

Then he was out the door, slamming it behind him.

CHAPTER II

Trailing With Death

BACK IN the big room Ward saw two men at the bar. Booted, spurred, big high-hatted six-footers. One had a handle-bar mustache. They turned their faces and regarded Ward as he approached them.

"Hiya, stranger," Mustache spoke up. "Come up and join us."

"Thanks, but I'm in kind of a shove," Ward answered, barely aware of what was said.

Ten minutes afterward he had his gun and horse and was riding eastward out of the silent town. He remembered Albert Tyle and craned around. The little man was nowhere to be seen, but the two tall-looking men of the saloon were standing on the walk, and it seemed as if they were gazing after him.

A half-mile out of the settlement Ward's preoccupied thoughts remembered the two men. He looked back. The two, or a pair like them, were riding out of town as if on his trail. His mind gathered in something then that he had barely noted, without really registering, there in the saloon. The eyes of the two men had been on him as sharp and glittering as weasel eyes.

Ward held his horse to its easy, tireless saddle gait. When he looked over his shoulder the two riders were no nearer. Ward lifted to a lope. The pair back there did likewise. Minutes later when Ward dropped down to a walk the men slowed also. A ticklish crawl went along Ward's spine. No doubt about it, they were on his trail. He faced them and waited. They came up with bright, watchful eyes.

"Yuh wouldn't drink with us," said Mustache. "Mebbe yuh'll ride with us."

"I'd be plumb scared to run from yuh," said Ward, turning his horse in the direction they were riding.

They parted to get him between them. In a quick shift Ward got on their left. They would have to shoot across their bodies. His gun could fire the instant it jumped from its leather.

At Ward's move the pretended good nature drained from their faces. Ward chuckled grimly.

"If it's a hold-up," he said, "yuh won't get much but my hoss and saddle."

Smooth Face, the better of the two men, Ward surmised, said easily enough:

"Yuh kind of shovin' the betting?"

"Might as well get the turkey cooked," Ward drawled.

"What'd Al tell yuh?" demanded Smooth Face.

"Al?"

"Albert Tyle. In the back room. We heard him, at the last—voice kind of ratty."

"So yuh're a couple of Warren Abbott's crows," Ward observed, and was shocked that the big outfit must be keeping tabs on him.

Nothing more was said for some little distance.

Then Handle-bar Mustache spoke.

"Al floated off. Nigh a year ago. Just got wind where he was."

"Yuh didn't see him ride out of town with me," said Ward.

"Seen you, though. We can pick up Li'l Al later."

"If we don't squatter too much time," Smooth Face interjected. "Al can rabbit away purty fast."

The steady tempo of the horses' hoofs on the hard, dry ground, creak of saddle leather, jingle of bits and spurs continued. The men kept scanning the country. It was empty, not a ranchhouse, not even a cow. The land was slightly rolling now. Only the yellowing cottonwoods of the town back there were distantly visible.

Ward had never been more alert in any situation. These men would probably be lightning with their guns. His hand lifted to his own six-shooter. He disliked to take that advantage, but he would probably need that much of a start.

The horses slowed in the ascent of a little rise. At the summit the pair pulled up and took in what was below.

"Ditch," said Mustache.

"Brush," said Smooth Face.

Ward jerked and spurred his horse. The quick jump put him slightly ahead, facing the pair. His fist was on his gun. They studied him bleakly.

Mustache turned in his saddle and looked back toward town. Smooth Face's eyes held steadily on Ward, Ward's on him. Mustache spoke.

"Somebody's comin' on a hoss."

Ward caught himself in time. Neither his watchful stare, nor Smooth Face's, wavered a hair's breadth.

"Neat trick, if it had worked," Ward taunted.

"But there is somebody comin'," said Mustache. "By grabs, it's Al!"

ALBERT TYLE stopped two horses' lengths away, desperation in the small face.

"I don't aim to be a shadder flittin' hither and yon all over the West," he flung out. "Nickerson, you with me or with them?"

"They was just about to get their fingers burned," said Ward. "They was pickin' out a brush patch for me, down there."

"I seen 'em trailin' yuh out of town. Took me a good while to make up my mind. Hairface, there, is Lee Hyatt. T'other one is Tom Dakin. Last time I seen 'em they was ridin' for Abbott at double pay."

"Mebbe we could all ride back together," said Ward, "and talk things over with Abbott."

Not that he meant it. He only wanted to see their reaction, figure out what they might now have in mind. The Abbott gunmen did not seem to be too much put out. Dakin, the smooth-faced one, said with hard brightness:

"Shore, might as well be friends like, seein' we're all together. Ride ahead, gents."

Albert Tyle laughed. A surprising, ringing, jeering laugh. It made Ward half-way like the man for the first time. Dakin and Hyatt didn't like it. Anger flashed in their faces. Dakin was the first to make a concession.

"Go ahead, Lee," he directed Hyatt.

As Hyatt moved out, Dakin nodded to Ward and they moved off side by side, with Tyle bringing up the rear. This had its significance for Ward. These men who knew Tyle, evidently knew that Tyle was not a man to shoot a man in the back. Or was this whole thing a fix-up? And if so, why?

Through noontime, and the interminable afternoon with its vast emptiness, the four held the formation they had started with, except when one got down to open a gate, or they scattered in crossing a rocky creek. At such times they watched one another like wary dogs. On one of these occasions Mustache had trouble getting the wire gate back up.

"Lee's the scaredest of the whole bunch of us," Al Tyle, watching him, said with amusement. "He could tell yuh a whole lot, Nickerson, about Lem Singleton."

"Rabbit," said Lee Hyatt, "yuh're settin' yoreself for intanglemints."

"There'll be a showdown tonight, if Hyatt gets half a chance," Ward thought.

They rode into a scattered town in a gorgeously clear November sunset. There they took rooms at the shabby wooden hotel, Dakin and Hyatt together, and Ward and Tyle separately. They ate together since there was but one table, and afterward played passtime poker for an hour. Ward liked the idea. It enabled him to keep an eye on the other three. He was the winner, coming out with eleven dollars of Dakin's and Hyatt's money.

They went upstairs and to their rooms at the same time. Without undressing, Ward lay on his bed thinking, in the dark. It was an impossible situation. Dangerous. Dakin and Hyatt had evidently been sent to dispatch Tyle. With Tyle and himself having had a talk, he must be included in the wiping out. Who was back of it? Warren Abbott? The setup behind the wire?

Twice Ward thought he heard floor boards in the hall squeak as if under a stealthy step. Abruptly he left the room boldly, with no effort at silence. At the rear door of the hall he paused and listened. Nobody looked out, or followed. He made his way down the back stairs to an alley, then toward the livery stable where they had left their horses.

A cold night wind had come up, blanketing sounds. The Milky Way was hazed over. It was too dark to penetrate shadows at all. No citizen seemed to be out.

Ward crossed a street and kept on along the alley. At the next street he paused. The livery stable was diagonally across from him now. He leaned against a corner and watched. There was no light or stir around the stable.

Then above the hum of the wind his ears caught the sound of a movement. Slowly his eyes made out the black bulk of a man standing completely still an arm's length away. Ward had no idea where he had come from, how long he had been there. The man spoke, barely above a whisper.

"That you, Lee?" It was Dakin asking.

When Ward did not instanly reply Dakin must have realized his mistake, for Ward sensed sudden movement. Without knowing how he knew it, he was sure a gun was being raised at him. Instantly he threw an uppercut with his right, all his body behind it. His fist hit the softness of a throat. The head tilted back. A gun went off.

Ward followed the blow with a shove against the man's face. Then a full-armed punch. The man went down.

Instantly a battle started out in the middle of the street. Two guns were stabbing the night with short, sharp yellow flashes. The sounds blasted loudly between the buildings. Then one gun stopped. A man grunted, tried to cry out, but dropped. The other gun stopped, and Ward heard footsteps running away.

WAS little Tyle down in the street? Ward ran out with long strides, knelt beside the dark patch of a body. His hand touched a mustache. Lee Hyatt! From a gurgle of blood, from the complete limpness of the body when he shook it, Ward knew the man was dead, or close to it.

The big door of the livery stable rumbled open.

"Hi, what's goin' on?" a voice called.

As Ward legged it back to the alley, Dakin was trying to get up. Ward kept on. He took the back stairs of the hotel silently, went down the hall, down the front stairs. The old landlord was still up. Ward made some idle talk, paid for his supper and unused room. The old man was half-way suspicious, but said nothing.

When Ward got to the stable a little crowd was in the street with lanterns. Nobody seemed to be in the stable. He hurried back along the stalls and saddled his horse, but returned to the big, open door for a look before attempting to ride out. He saw men with lanterns, and other men staggering clumsily along with a body. A lantern left the crowd and came hurrying to the barn. It was the stable proprietor. He held up his lantern and regarded Ward.

"Hah!" he ejaculated. "One of the strangers. You in that shootin'?"

"No," said Ward. "Heard the shots. I just come from the hotel. Somebody get hurt?"

"Yore pardner with the mustache. Killed."

The others stumbled in with the body, laid it in a stall. Then they all centered on Ward, holding lanterns high and staring at him.

"You kill that feller?" one of the men demanded.

There was a shout, and a horse came plunging along the barn's runway. The men gave back. As the rider plunged past them and out the door Ward saw by the light of the lanterns that it was Dakin.

"Reckon that answers yore question," he said.

The men all ran out. Dakin had steered to the right. The men shouted, and kept on running. A block away there were answering shouts, and two or three shots.

Ward went back to his saddled horse. He dropped a half-dollar into the empty feed

box and quietly led his mount to the rear door. There, he remembered the little man Tyle. He went back along the stalls. Tyle's horse was gone.

A minute later Ward was out in the windy night and on his way home.

CHAPTER III

Invitation to Murder

WARD NICKERSON was not a man to over-ride and punish a horse to gain a few hours on a trip. So it was late afternoon two days later when he came in sight of his own little ranch. And also in sight of the six-strand barb-wire fence that enclosed Warren Abbott's vast domain.

The wire shimmered in the late sun, seeming as usual to smirk and mock and challenge. One of the little board signs that were nailed to posts every two or three miles around the entire fence was before him all at once, with the brand of the ranch burned on it and the stenciled warning:

STAY OFF MY
COUNTRY
WARREN ABBOTT

"Stay off or be killed!" Ward thought, then his bitterness vanished as he saw a saddled horse without a rider on his own land a mile away.

He lifted his tired mount into a lope. The saddled animal was on the bank of Antelope Arroyo, a shallow drywash that cut across the corner of his ranch and swept on into Abbott country. In a minute he recognized the horse as one of his own. He rode faster.

As he reached the bank he saw his one hired man, Carlos Pompa, down in the arroyo repairing the fence. Carlos looked up, and began to shout excitedly.

"Mistah Ward, Mistah Ward, our ranch, he shot to pieces. Bust. Nineteen fat steers all gone!"

Ward plunged down the bank to the rocky floor. He shook hands with the Mexican.

"Keep yore shirt on," he said quietly, "and tell me what yuh're talkin' about."

Carlos drew in a quick breath. "You go wan week ago. You tell me, 'Carlos, you gather up them sixty fat steers for market when I get back home.' I do. I put 'em in thees li'l pasture, lak you say. Today now I come see eef they all well and happy. I count 'em. Forty-one. Nineteen is not here. Fooey, lak smoke of the cigarette, gone. I ride the wire. I find thees hole. I find thees tracks."

Ward followed the plentiful tracks of cattle in the soft, moist sand. All at once he pointed to the ground.

"That hoss track—is it yores?"

"Hah! No. I do not see that."

"Shod track. It looks as if somebody drove the steers through."

They stepped on to the half-mended hole through the wire, against the bank.

"What's this?" Ward demanded. "That wire was cut."

"Esure, Mistah Ward, I see that. Som'body mak that hole for purpose."

Ward stood tensely pondering. He did not say so to the Mexican but he knew that these tracks, the cut wire, the missing steers, were an invitation, a challenge, to ride in on Abbott's country—and be killed, or captured, or whatever it was they did to men over there. Who had framed the invitation? And why? Because he had talked with Albert Tyle? How would they know that here? Had Dakin got back? Or Tyle?

"We go in, we find our steers, Mistah Ward?" Carlos demanded.

"We'll have to get the steers back," said Ward, "or we'll use bacon grease for butter this winter, and gunnysacks for pants."

"Le's go!"

"We'll sleep on it first," said Nickerson.

They finished patching up the hole and rode on home through the long shadows of sunset and in gloomy silence. . . .

Ward Nickerson spent a dream-filled, restless night. But by morning something of a plan had emerged. He would stick to the law as long as he could, but he would not be balked.

He was in a cold saddle by gray and frosty daylight. It was a long ride to town, and the road paralleled the hated wire for miles. The Hysinger ranch, dimly seen, lay off to the left. He thought of turning off to see how the sick old man and Worth were faring. But he hated to hear old Hysinger's whimpering and see his failing body. And he dreaded the hate in Worth's eyes for Abbott and his outfit, and the scorn in her laughter for—himself, as he saw it.

Besides he was eager to get to town. It was Saturday, and Abbott would be there on his weekly trip for mail, telegrams, and business at the bank. Ward did not want to

miss him.

It was mid-forenoon when he arrived at the county seat. And as chance would have it almost the first man he saw was Warren Abbott. The man was riding down the middle of the main street. The thick, heavy figure in the saddle made Ward think, as always, of a stuffed shirt. Ward met him horse-shoulder to shoulder, grimly. Abbott stopped like a block of rock.

"Abbott," Ward opened without greeting, "nineteen of my fat steers have got through yore wire onto yore country."

"You should have been more watchful, Nickerson," the "patron of the arts" and philanthropist replied heavily.

"The wire was cut," Ward said flatly.

"Who cut it?"

"And my steers were driven through."

"Evidently you are trying to inform me that somebody outside of my fence drove your cattle onto my country to dispose of, no doubt, to some of my employes."

"No. Some of yore men cut the wire and drove the stuff through as bait for me to go after 'em."

FOR the first time Abbott's eyes really considered Ward. His head shook slowly.

"I advise you not to go in after them," he said. "That would be trespassing, which is forbidden."

Ward laughed shortly at the man's dogmatic stupidity. Abbott gave him a sharper look, then he made a movement in the saddle as if to ride on.

Ward whirled his horse around and blocked the way.

"I'm not through yet, mister!" he said coldly.

Ward had been aware that people on the street were watching them. He realized that his stopping Abbott, blocking the big man's way, was something to make the town gasp. Men and women were beginning to move toward them. A rider clattered up. Ward's steady, cold eyes flicked away from Abbott. The rider was a girl.

"Worth!" he said savagely and warningly. "This may get rough."

"How singular!" she retorted.

Other riders were coming up now and people on foot. This was a sight to behold—somebody talking up to the Emperor! Ward caught sight of three horsemen coming at a clipping trot and in a compact group. He recognized them as three of Abbott's men—two foremen and Noone Gill, whom people knew as Abbott's head fence rider, or in the language of the disrespectful, his chief of police.

Without slacking, the three bunched tightly together in keen teamwork and rode straight at Ward. Ward saw that he had to give back or let his horse take an impact from the three horses. He reined back, just barely from in front of Abbott, and there held his ground.

The trio pulled up sharply, scarcely an arm's length away. Noone Gill addressed his boss.

"Now, Mr. Abbott," he said respectfully, motioning to the opened path, "yuh can go on, if yuh want."

Abbott acknowledged the man's act with a slight nod. His eyes studied Ward anew.

"Abbott," said Ward, "I want my steers back."

"The Rod-and-Compass," Abbott replied formally, "will pursue its adopted policy in regard to your stock straying onto my country, Nickerson. Sooner or later my riders will come across your brand, and your cows will be returned to you."

"I need the stuff back now, for the fall beef market," snapped Ward.

"You will be notified when they are found," Abbott said coldly. "You may come in then, regularly at the gate, and get them."

"That might be six months or a year," Ward said.

"It is possible," Abbott agreed. He said to his men, "I shall be at the office an hour or so attending to correspondence before I am ready to start home."

Again his body bent slightly in a starting movement. And again Ward was in front of him. Instantly Noone Gill spurred his horse against Ward's, shoving hard. Deliberately Ward looked down and back and thrust out his heel and touched, barely touched, Gill's horse with his spur on the tender inner side of its hind leg.

The already half-excited horse snorted and jumped sideward, all but unseating the surprised Gill. The crowd snickered. The man did not crowd back for more, perhaps not wanting to be made a fool of before his employer. But fire burned redly in his eyes.

Ward leaned forward and seized Abbott's saddle-horn.

"Mister," he said, "before all these witnesses I'm askin' yuh fair for permission to go on yore land with one man and bring my steers out."

A hush fell. In it Abbott shook his head slowly, and said ponderously:

"It is not permitted."

Ward drew back. He kept his temper, but not his dislike.

"Abbott," he challenged, "yuh're what the whole county calls yuh, a throw-back. Yore father and grandfather no doubt were justified in shootin' trespassers. I understand that fifty, forty, thirty years ago cattle thieves were thick hereabouts. But every man bordering yuh now owns his land. I've never heard of one of them bein' called a rustler."

"Any man will steal cattle if he can avoid detection," said Abbott heavily.

Ward's temper slipped a notch.

"Abbott," he snapped, "what have yuh got on yore country yuh don't want honest men to see? What do yuh keep hid in yore canyons and mountains? What's happened to the five men who disappeared in the last six years? What kind of murder mill are yuh operatin' inside yore wire?"

In the dead silence of the street Warren Abbott's slow eyes studied Ward Nickerson, seemingly without anger, as he would study the sky for weather, or try to get at the meaning of a fool. Then he nodded to his men, and rode unhurriedly out of the throng around him.

AS THE crowd dropped away, leaving space, Worth Hysinger nudged her horse up to Ward's.

"Well—well!" she said derisively.

Ward smiled ruefully, shook his head.

"I don't see how a man can get so set in his ways in just forty years. I might as well have talked to his land."

"Policy," she said. "It solidifies the human mind." Her gray eyes met his levelly. "You'll be riding in after your steers," she half-said, half-asked.

"I'm talkin' with the Law next," Ward anwered

"Policy!" she repeated, and wheeled away with a low, scornful laugh.

A cowboy rode close past Ward.

"Good job, Ward, tellin' Abbott how," he said. A man on foot slapped Ward's thigh.

"Yuh got him told, Nickerson."

Fennel, a neighbor of Ward's half-whispered:

"Ward, keep yore eye peeled on that Noone Gill. He ain't goin' to get over that laugh yuh put on him easy."

"But nobody tells me they'll help me get my steers back," Ward thought. "And I don't blame 'em."

He saw Sheriff Wallace going into the Gold Bar Saloon. Might as well tackle him, he decided, and trotted his horse to a hitchrack.

Inside the Gold Bar, Wallace was stepping back from the rail when Ward went in. Ward touched his arm.

"A word with yuh, Sheriff, if yuh can spare the time."

"What's time to a sheriff?" Wallace said jocularly, and followed Ward to the poker room in the rear.

In the winterish, cheerless room smelling of dead tobacco smoke Wallace faced Ward.

"Don't ever say, Nickerson, that I'm Abbott's sheriff, but I don't aim to go pirootin' with yuh after them steers, if that's what yuh want."

"Abbott don't mess with anything as small as a sheriff, does he?" said Ward.

"That's right," Wallace agreed, and flushed under his clear, pink skin.

"How about if I have a warrant, Wallace?"

"That would be a hoss with different hair. But how can yuh swear out a warrant? They haven't stole yore cattle."

"How's a search warrant?"

"A search warrant is tricky. They're usually to locate stolen property. Like I say, the Rod-and-Compass haven't stole yore steers. Yuh've got to show in a search warrant exactly where said property is, who's holdin' it, who took it, and so on. If yuh institoot a false search yuh can be sued, and so can the sheriff and his bondsmen."

"What kind of papers did them State officers have?" Ward asked.

"Yuh mean after Buddy Hysinger disappeared? I don't know. I wasn't invited to the party."

"Was Abbott hisself in the party?"

"No. The bunch came back sayin' Abbott had showed 'em every consideration. Furnished 'em guides—his own men!—wined and dined 'em in the big house, and fed 'em roast venison out of season. When they got back here they acted as if they'd been fed and curried by royalty."

"Who does Abbott's killin'?" Ward plumped the question flatly.

"How'n thunder would I know?"

"Yuh ever know Albert Tyle?"

"Some."

"What about him?"

"Little. That's all I can tell yuh. Why?"

Ward did not answer. He leaned a shoulder against the wall, hung his thumbs in his belt, regarded the officer thoughtfully.

"So yuh don't want to take any hand about my steers?" he asked at last.

"How can I?" the sheriff asked plaintively.

"Well, if anything happens, Wallace, yuh can say I tried to be legal but didn't get any

encouragement."

"That's unfair, Nickerson."

They faced each other for a moment, anger in the sheriff, contempt in Ward Nickerson. Then Wallace turned and went out the back door.

Ward opened the door to the saloon room. Three men were standing beyond it, evidently waiting—Abbott's two foremen and his "chief of police," Noone Gill.

Gill stepped forward quickly, peered in, and saw that the room was empty.

"Don't run, Nickerson," he said. "I want a word with yuh in private."

Ward flashed a quick grin.

"Suits me," he said, and stepped back into the room.

CHAPTER IV

Bearding the Lion

GILL KICKED the door to behind him with an expensive boot. In growing up he had not attained Ward's height of six feet, but he was a little heavier, with smooth-moving muscles. A tailored blue wool shirt fit his compact shoulders like a glove.

Short of thirty, he was about Ward's age. A man to have plenty of women partners at a dance, if they didn't see the arrogance in his handsome face and the rooster-strutting in his body, which Ward saw now.

"So yuh took a little trip out westly," Gill began at once.

Here was another man, Ward decided, with whom there was no use to try sparring.

"I saw Al Tyle, if that's what yuh mean, Gill," he said carelessly.

"Did the rabbit spill his insides to yuh?"

"Not quite as much as I'd like to have on you and yore pards as regards Buddy Hysinger."

Noone Gill flushed around the neck and anger picked up in him.

"Yuh've been doin' too much fishin' in that direction lately, Nickerson," he growled. "The Rod-and-Compass don't like it."

"I'm not much concerned any more, Gill, in what the Pig-in-a-Poke likes or don't like."

"Kind of carefree, uh, seein' yuh're in a tight anyhow, over yore shootin' down of Lee Hyatt." Gill was good with a sneer.

"Did I shoot him?" Ward countred. "Yuh got the news quick, about that and me seein' Tyle."

"We have our outposts, Nickerson, to keep us informed. Besides, Tom Dakin beat yuh home."

"And cut my wire and drove my steers onto Abbott's country. I all but rode through after 'em, yesterday evenin', Gill. Yuh disappointed I didn't?"

"I didn't think yuh'd have the nerve to."

"Eggin' me on, Gill?"

"The steers is neither there nor here right now, Nickerson. What's mainly under my hair right now is what happened out there in the street a while ago. Before Mr. Abbott and a lot of people. Yuh put the snicker on me, hombre."

"What yuh goin' to do about it, Gill?"

"Knock yuh through that door behind yuh and give the laugh back to the crowd in the barroom."

"What's delayin' yuh?"

Gill didn't delay. But he underestimated. He drew back and sent a pile-driver punch at Ward's face. Ward avoided it by a simple quarter pivot and by jerking his head back. In the same lightning move his left hand caught the extended arm, his right hand clutched Gill's necktie, and he jerked forward. Gill's impetus helped. Gill's front hit the door. Ward flung all his weight and the power of his legs against Gill's back. The door flung open with a bang.

Ward, going forward, caught his balance first. As Gill turned, Ward's right arced up in a long curve to Gill's chin. Gill's head clicked up and he sat down six feet away. Ward slapped the man's hat off and yanked Gill up by the thick hair of his head. Ward gave the old straight punch then, the one with which Gill had started the fireworks. And Gill hit the thin sawdust at full stretch on his back.

Ward, seeing that Gill's spring was unwound for the moment, gave the startled faces at the bar a searching stare. Then he grinned a little, an enjoying grin and went clunking for the front door.

Worth Hysinger caught up with Ward beyond the dingy skirts of the town.

"Hi, hero!" She was gleeful. "Mind if I ride as far as the Hysinger hacienda with you?"

"I never object to good company, woman."

"With the emphasis on the good. Nobody knows better than you what awful company I've been the last few months. Ward, the

scandal's all over town, like bluing in a washtub—how you put the chief of police down for a catnap, and how you've had a talk-talk with the ex-killer of the Pig-in-a-Poke. Ward, what did you get out of that Albert Tyle, about Buddy?"

"I told him no man likes a woman's scorn."

"That's past, Ward. I'll admit that at first we thought you, as a neighbor, should cross the wire and find out about Buddy. We feel differently now."

"Yeah? Yuh can still light a fire in yore eye, and cackle."

"And you can hump a shoulder too, tall man. That scorn stuff, it's just in your mind. What did Tyle tell you?"

"I hate to tell yuh, Worth. It's one thing that's kept me on this side of the wire for a year, what I might have to tell you and yore dad. Tyle said Buddy was killed."

Her breath caught, then let go.

"Thanks, Ward," she said with contained steadiness. "It's better to know than to go on imagining worse. I know how you must have hated to give me such news. That ranch! That Abbott, that fence, those killers! I've been half crazy for a year, Ward. Tell me more. Who killed him? Where is Tyle now, with his evidence?"

HE TOLD her all that had happened, from the time he had discovered the two men following him from town, after the talk with Tyle, to the killing of Hyatt on the road.

"Dakin got back before I did," he said. "No doubt in my mind he was the one who cut the wire and chased my steers through, to toll me in. Back there"—Ward nodded toward the town behind them—"Noone Gill said I killed Hyatt."

"They'll put it on you, Ward, if they can, the vile gang!" Worth cried. "Or kill you. Ward, you mustn't go through after your steers. You don't intend to, do you?"

"That's between me and my conscience, if any."

"So you intend to. They'll get you, sure. Don't, Ward, please don't. No-no, I take that back, Ward. I won't get in your way. I won't nag. But—"

She didn't finish. After a mile or two of silence they began to talk of other things—grass, and stock water, the cattle market, new oilcloth for the kitchen table, funnyisms Ward's Mexican had sprung. They could be great friends on a ride like this, either talking or remaining silent with their thoughts for miles.

Ward turned in at the Hysinger ranch with Worth for a belated dinner. Old Dean Hysinger, once a hustling, though a kind of bookish, cowman sat in a hot room by a roaring stove with a shawl around his shoulders, though the November day was quite sunny.

"Got no blood any more," he complained. "No spunk, since Buddy's gone. Yuh heard anything new, son?"

"No," Ward lied.

"Yuh might have, if yuh'd gone through as soon as yuh got back home."

"Now, Dad," Worth protested. "We've talked that all out. Ward would have been killed by those thugs. Even if he hadn't been it isn't likely he could have learned anything to help."

"Yes—yes," Hysinger murmured. "That's right, Ward."

But it wasn't right, Ward knew, as he rode on home in the shank of the day. His not going in to hunt for Buddy still lay between them, and always would. And he might as well have gone, he'd had to tell Worth anyhow that Buddy was dead. It would not have hurt much worse a year ago. But for a man to sell his life, to be shot down, without recompense, without accomplishing any good, gave something to think about. . . .

With a clawhammer Ward Nickerson drew out most of the staples in four posts of the Abbott fence. This was five miles from where his steers had walked through the hole. Gill's men, he supposed, would be laying for him there. He stepped carefully on the loosened wire, mashed the strands to the ground, and led his horse carefully across. As he stapled the wire back he smiled in the darkness over his parting conversation with Carlos Pompa.

"Wher' you goin', Mistah Ward? After them steers?"

"Yes."

"Me, too."

"No, not 'me too', Carlos, You'll stay here and look after things. I may be gone for a couple of days."

"Couple days, hah. Wher' you want be buried if we don't find you?"

"The buzzards will attend to that," Ward had assured.

"Two mans more better as one," Carlos had pleaded.

"Nope."

"They keel you, I no have job. No have butter for bacon grease. I mean—I lak you more better'n bacon—lak butter better'n you—no-no, I mean better bacon grease is you

. . . oh, *por Dios,* thees English lingo. I mean—"

"I know, Carlos," Ward had said. "Good-by".

With a hasty hand-shake Ward had headed for his horse. Now, with the fence restapled, he swung to saddle and struck out into the forbidden country.

It was the first time he had ever set foot on Abbott's land, or even been across the wire. He felt as he supposed a man must feel entering a foreign land. Alone. Lonely. A little tickly along the spine.

And what good would it all do? He might get his steers back, but that wasn't his reason for this trip, he knew. He wasn't going so he could wipe the scorn out of Worth Hysinger's eyes, or out of his own mind, wherever it was. No, he was going for a bigger reason than that—to try to stop the killings on this ranch.

"Shucks," he thought. "Don't be heroic. I'm goin', I suppose, because I know Noone Gill and his killers will get me anyhow, sooner or later—unless I can get them first—because they think Al Tyle told me too much."

He rode diagonally away from the fence, to arrive at a mesquite flat two or three miles inland from the hole where his steers had entered the Abbott land. A waning moon was up when he reached the scattered thickets. He had timed himself for this. He rode back and forth for a while, eyes and ears tense for any sound or sight of man or beast. And heard and saw nothing.

AT DAYBREAK he was ten or twelve miles inland. Not a house, or any smoke, or a rider was to be seen in all the gray expanse of dawn. At a little trickle spring he frizzled bacon on a stick over a practically smokeless fire and ate it between cold biscuits. Then he rode on, farther in, keeping to a brushy creek.

At noon he slept for two hours, relaxing completely. Afterward he rode into a scatterment of little hills, winding here and there to keep from skylining himself. Now and then he climbed on foot to a low, rocky summit for a wide conning of the country, to get the lay of the land. No houses, no riders were to be seen, but here and there whitefaced cattle grazed. He was used to silence in riding his own land, but here the stillness in the warm November afternoon seemed deeper than any he had ever known.

A feeling came to him that he was not making any headway in his search for the secrets of the great ranch. He felt futile. In the midst of this he turned out of the hills unexpectedly—and without warning came upon a scene that stopped him and his good bay horse flatfooted.

Before him were cattle scattered around a windmill and a circular cement water tank. Chunks of rock salt lay about—a cattle lick. And beyond the cattle were two men on horseback.

The men saw him almost as soon as he saw them. They came riding around the herd, watching him intently. He nudged the bay to meet them.

CHAPTER V

Mr. Half-and-Half

THE MEN Ward Nickerson had so unexpectedly encounted carried rifles in saddle scabbards, and revolvers at their belts. Before they met, Ward could see metal disks, or badges, pinned on their shirts.

"Hi!" one of the pair greeted, "Who're you?"

"New man on the ranch," said Ward.

"Where's yore badge?" the man challenged.

They drew up close enough for Ward to read the metal disks they wore. On one was, "Foreman No. 6, Abbott's Rod-and-Compass Ranch." On the other was "Range Rider No. 14, Abbott's Rod-and-Compass Ranch."

"Why," said Ward, running thumb and finger along the lapel of his unbuttoned vest, and looking down in pretended surprise, "I must have lost it."

When he looked up their six-guns were leveling at him, with stern faces behind them.

"Trespassin', uh?" said the range rider.

For the third time in recent days Ward Nickerson knew there was no use in beating around the bush or denying the truth.

"Yes," he said.

"Where'd yuh get in?" demanded Foreman No. 6.

"North side."

"Cut the wire?"

"Let it down, and put it back."

"What yuh after?" prodded the range rider.

"I'd like to buy this ranch from Warren Abbott," Ward said casually, and the foreman laughed shortly.

"A lot of jaspers would," he said, "but they

ain't got the dinero. You a Pinkerton or some other Law, mister?"

"I'm not a Law." Ward shrugged.

"What are yuh?"

"Just let it stand as trespasser."

"Get down, feller," came a peremptory order then.

Ward wondered if this was to be the moment of his disposal. The two men took his rifle and six-gun, and searched thoroughly for further arms. Then:

"Yuh'll have to ride in to Number Six with us," the range rider said then. "Foller Moller here and I'll be right on yore heels."

It was close to sundown when they arrived at a neat setting of adobe buildings and rail pens. On a board with the burned Rod-and-Compass brand was the designation Sub-Division No. 6. A Mexican man and woman and six or eight children were around. The woman served supper.

There was little talk through the short evening. The three men slept in the same room. All guns were left out of the room. The range rider shoved his half-bed against the door. The foreman, Moller, slept against the window, and Ward against a blank wall.

They were up at daybreak. The range rider gulped his breakfast and said he had to finish his round of fences and water-holes.

"I'll be back early in the afternoon," he told Ward, "and drift yuh on towards the big headquarters. What Mr. Abbott and Noone Gill will do for yuh will be plenty."

As soon as he was out of the house Moller, who had said practically nothing so far this morning commented:

"It's always a relief when the police are gone. They can be pretty gruff."

"Police?" Ward echoed.

"Oh, that's what most of us call them range riders. Their job is to look after fences and water-holes and windmills, and bogged cattle, if any, and keep an eye out for trespassers and such like, and grass fires—just spies in general on all the rest of us. Mr. Abbott keeps close tabs on his people. It's such a big outfit he has to. Him and his superintendent, Arthur Blaine, are shore tough on trespassers. But yuh can't blame Mr. Abbott. He inherited the spread from his granddad and his dad. Calls it the law of the Medes and Persians the way he handles trespassers—he never lets 'em off."

"Sounds as if it will go rough with me," Ward commented.

Foreman Moller dawdled with his coffee, relit his cigarette before he spoke again.

"Yuh're not an ordinary trespasser—er—Nickerson, did yuh say yore name was?" he said then. "I'm curious enough to ask what yuh're after."

Ward thoughtfully flicked his cigarette butt into the fireplace.

"Moller," he said, "yuh seem to me to be an honest and fair-dealin' man. I'll speak my piece. I want to know what happened to Buddy Hysinger. And the four other fellows who have vanished inside the Abbott wire in the last six years."

"Five vanished?" Moller asked in surprise. "I never heard of but three, and I've been inside Abbott's wire ten years. Way back yonder it was a feller named Leeks. Just a plain rustler. I always heard he got his in a plain shoot-out. Then couple of years ago a feller named Signalman or Singleton or somethin' like that. And a few months ago the young feller yuh named—Hysinger."

"What happened to Hysinger?"

Moller shook his head. "Yuh've scraped the bottom of the barrel with me, Nickerson. I don't know. The talk was he'd just disappeared. How come yuh happen in here just at this time?"

WARD gave him the whole set-up, much as he had told Albert Tyle in the back room of the saloon in town. Only now he finished with the apparent attempt of Dakin and Hyatt to kill him, and Hyatt's death in a street gun fight in the night.

"So Lee Hyatt got his," said Moller. "Not much loss. Him and Dakin have been settin' in close with Chief Gill. The rest of the riders ain't got no use for the three of 'em. Jealous, mebbe. Or think Gill is playin' favorites. They don't like Gill nohow."

"Why?"

"Oh, Noone Gill is strong for Number One," Moller said. "Always around Mr. Abbott. Always takin' care of his own job first. If anything goes wrong he lays it on to some of his men. Wurgler—that's the rider that just left—he mutters and grumbles about Gill everytime I see him. Once he said it looked like Gill had a man hid in the brush to spy on the riders. Said that feller Tyle yuh mentioned got out because he was scared plumb yeller. Seemed like Wurgler meant scared by the feller in the brush. Which may all be fool talk."

Moller got up, paused with his back to the fireplace, looking uncertain.

"Nickerson," he said, "I don't know just what to do with yuh. Me and the Mexican have got to get out on the range workin' beef for the fall market. Reckon I'll have to

leave yuh here. May get it from Mr. Abbott for doin' it. But anyhow yuh're Wurgler's job, not mine. If I leave yuh, will yuh run off?"

"Might," said Ward with a quick grin.

Moller scratched a leg uneasily. "Tell yuh a little more, Nickerson. That man Singlemann and yore friend Hysinger, they was both bein' held at sub-divisions. They both wandered off, or got away somehow—and disappeared. That's a little likker gab Wurgler handed me once, when he was more'n usual mad at Noone Gill. Mebbe yuh better just stick around here, Nickerson, till Wurgler gets back."

"Mebbe," said Ward, and with that half-assurance the foreman left the house.

As soon as Moller and his Mexican rode off Ward began a search for his guns. He found them finally under a mattress in a bedroom—Wurgler's work, probably. They were still loaded, and undamaged.

Ward returned to the main room where he had seen a map on the wall. It was a blueprint, excellently done, in a wooden frame, and about four by six feet. It showed what Ward supposed was the entire Abbott ranch—mountains and creeks, springs and windmills, the outer boundary fence and inner fences, roads, and had the sub-divisions, all numbered.

With his eyes Ward traced his route to Number 6, across three roads, two fences. Using the scale of miles he measured with a straw and found that he was inside the wire from his own ranch a distance of twenty-three miles. And he was thirty-seven miles from Abbott's headquarters.

Ten or twelve miles, southwest of where he stood at No. 6 was a patch marked "Rough Badlands." The only such marking on the blueprint. In smaller lettering, that he almost missed in the shadowy room, was a notation, "Scant grazing—too rough for cattle."

With his guns Ward wandered outside. The Mexican woman and several children watched him in Indian silence. He made a circuit of buildings and pens, noting that his horse was in a pen. He tramped out a quarter of a mile and made a wider circle of the place.

Was he being watched by some hidden gunman? Was this the method of making men disappear? Every step was ticklish, at the last, where he was in scattered brush. But he saw no human being. He did find three trails, though, running off into lonesome brush country. One led southwest, but its dust-dryness showed no tracks other than the cloven hoofprints of cattle.

Ward returned to the pens, saddled, and rode into the southwest trail toward the region labeled "Rough Badlands." It might be as likely a place as any to go.

Through the long day Ward rode stealthily, carefully, hearing and eyes sharpened like a prowling wolf's, watching his horse's ears to locate sounds that his own ears could not pick up. He spent the gloomy night without fire in a juniper thicket at the edge of what he supposed must be the Rough Badlands.

The last of his cold biscuits and bacon was consumed for breakfast. He rode on then, with the futility of his task multiplied tenfold in his mind. But an unaccountable urge drove him to go on and on into the region of scant grazing that was too rough for cattle, to see, to make certain—to make certain.

He had gone possibly a mile on the dim and unused trail when he saw another trail coming into it. It came like a shock, that other trail, like a surprise visitor where no visitor should be.

Then he saw the tracks of a horse. Shod prints, going his way. He got down to make sure. And as he squatted a voice spoke.

"Sufferin' horn toads! Nickerson!"

A stone's flip away, peering around a bend in the narrow trail, was Albert Tyle. His rifle was pointing, and his finger was on the trigger.

"Good glory!" he breathed. "I all but shot yuh. I thought yuh was—"

"Was what?" Ward asked, surprised himself that he said "what" instead of "who."

Well, Tyle was looking as if he meant what something, not a man.

"What yuh doin' here, Tyle?" he wanted to know.

TYLE lowered his rifle, let the hammer down carefully, and came forward three or four steps. Ward met him. Tyle put out his hand, and Ward shook with him. Tyle's face was pinched with fear, or alarm, and his body was trembling slightly.

"I thought—"

He got no further, for a scream like a panther's broke in, and a body came dropping from a rock above them.

Both Ward and Tyle, so close together in the handshake, went down under the crushing weight. Ward rolled to a terrific blow on his cheek. He heard a thud, heard Tyle grunt. Then he was being clawed as if by a cougar. Knew his gun was being taken, and he couldn't prevent it. Then he was no

longer being wolfed.

He sat up. In the same instant "something" lifted away from Tyle's body, with Tyle's rifle and revolver as well as Ward's belt-gun.

The something was a man, big and thick-muscled, hairy, and bareheaded. Also bare of feet, but wearing ragged levis and shirt. He was making throaty sounds that evidently were meant for the laughter of triumph. Tyle sat up, badly shaken, but unexpectedly his terror had changed to boiling wrath.

"Mr. Nickerson," he flung out contemptuously, "meet Mr. Half-and-Half."

"Half and half what?" Ward asked, staring incredulously at the great muscled shoulders that looked as if they could have held up a world.

"Half American, half Mexican. His pa was old Flickerweed."

The ragged giant stepped away, moving toward Ward's horse. He smelled of wood smoke and sweat and the lair of a beast. The horse began to give back, snorting, then turned to bolt. With an astonishing leap the man had the reins. He yanked Ward's rifle from its scabbard, and kicked the horse with his bare foot, sending it leaping in fright toward the two men. Ward caught the flying reins.

The giant, with two rifles and two revolvers under his arm, made shooing motions with his free hand.

"He means for us to go on," said Tyle. "He can spikka da Mex if he wants to, but usually he's too contrary."

Tyle led his horse from the brush. When both of them were mounted the little man started up the trail, Ward and the hairy monster following.

"Flickerweed's son?" Ward questioned blankly.

"Enoch Flicker," Tyle explained back over his shoulder. "He was head ranch guard and rustler-killer for Warren Abbott's pa, 'way back yonder. He was old when he married a Mexican woman and whelped this cur. Flickerweed, as they called him, was big, but this wolf is bigger, so they say. I never saw Flickerweed."

"Is this gorilla the answer to—things?" Ward asked.

"He's the answer," Tyle said drearily. "He's Gill's brush ghost."

"Yuh mean to say Gill uses him to do his killin' for him?"

"Not exactly. The Mexican law is layin' for Half-and-Half. Our law'd be layin' for him, too, if they knew what I know, and what Gill and Tom Dakin know. Yeah, and what Lee Hyatt knew before I killed him back yonder. Half, he don't dare get far from this hideout. But he roams, he 'haunts' the ranch. Nobody ever sees him. He can hide like a wild steer.

"He spies on the range riders and foremen, watches for trespassers. Chatters what he sees to Noone Gill. Noone likes his job somethin' awful. Half-and-Half helps him keep it. Gill pays him with feed and clo'es and a little ammunition. Gill didn't aim for Half to kill Lem Singleton and the Hysinger boy. That was, yuh might say, a slip-up."

"He killed Buddy Hysinger?" Ward asked, wanting it in plain words.

"Yes, yes! But don't talk about it!" Tyle was getting shrill. "I saw it! Twisted! Whew, he mighty nigh grabbed me, too!"

Tyle choked, and his small body shook uncontrollably. Ward waited for him to get collected.

"Where does he think he's takin' us now?" he asked then.

"Up to his look-out. His cave, where he dens up. He likes to take his catches there. Same as a housecat takes in the chipmunk it's killed."

Ward breathed, craned his neck to look at the ranch roamer. The giant was just stopping, looking back along the trail, his great dirty hand at his ear. He lifted his flaring nostrils and sniffed the breeze, then whipped around at Ward and Tyle with glittering, suspicious eyes. He saw them sitting their saddles showing nothing more than curiosity at his actions, and turned back to look and listen, and smell the air.

"He's heard somethin'," muttered Tyle.

Half-and-Half shooed them on again, with some urgency now.

"Move—move—go on," he ordered in Mexican.

The path was twisting and climbing. The horses were laboring. Then the trail split unexpectedly. Tyle thumbed toward it and said it went around the head of a canyon.

Immediately the track they were on fell away on the left. Ward saw that the giant stopped again, listening with both hands to his ears, the guns held against his ribs with his elbow. When he turned on them again he yelled excitedly:

"*Acelerar! Acelerar!* Hurry!"

He snatched up a rock and threw it. It hit Ward's horse. The animal jumped, and all but slid off the trail, down the pitching slope.

"He shore hears somethin'," said Tyle. "Who'n thunderation can be comin'?"

CHAPTER VI

Retribution

IN INCREASING excitement Half-and-Half drove them on, throwing rocks, growling, cursing monotonously in a garbled lingo. The path widened, then they moved along a ledge. They came to caves hollowed by time and wind and frost in the rocky wall. The drop, almost straight down, was a hundred feet, Ward thought. Then swiftly it became two hundred feet down the talus slopes to the bottom of the canyon. The narrow summit trail showed above them, against the blue sky.

"That lets this here wolf out to Mexico," said Tyle. "He won't go any farther than this."

And at once Half-and-Half called for them to stop. The horses were fearful of the narrow shelf. Half-and-Half's huge smoke-blackened, greasy hands half pulled Ward from saddle. Tyle jumped down hastily.

Half-and-Half slapped the trembling, excited horses into a tiny brush cove, gestured the men into a cave just high enough for them to stand, and stood with his back to the opening to keep them in. The animal smell of him was sickening.

The cave was a sound-catcher. The giant no longer listened with hand to ear. Even Ward began to hear voices dimly, and heard the sounds of horses on the rocky trail. Suddenly the hairy rags-and-tatters tossed all the guns over the cliff. Ward heard them clatter far below. The giant was almost dancing in excitement and anger.

Ward caught a movement on the opposite side of the canyon. It was no more than a hundred feet away but was on the morning-shade side of the deep cut.

"Riders have gone along that other path," Tyle whispered. "Seems like forty of 'em, altogether. Who'n thunder can they be? Rangers after us is all I can think of."

Ward made out two or three riders in the shady brush just as the half-breed snatched up a stone and flung it with a crazy shout. It flittered in the sunlight clear across the gash, and may have hit a horse, for one squealed.

Then a horseman appeared on the ledge, nearly a hundred yards away. It was Noone Gill. He came spurring on at top speed and began to motion violently, as if to send Half-and-Half on.

"Go on, you fool!" he called out in Spanish. "Get going! Over the top, there, you accursed ape!"

But the "ape" made no move to flee. Instead he ran forward a little way, shaking his huge fist at Gill.

"You bring men here!" he cried. "You bring the law to catch me!"

He hurled a rock. Noone Gill dodged it and yelled again for the giant to run. Over the top!

Then Gill, in a wider spot of the ledge, wheeled his horse. Another rider came into sight. Tom Dakin.

"Cuss yuh, Dakin!" Gill bawled. "You showed 'em the way here! You turned 'em on me!"

"Not till after yuh told 'em I killed the Hysinger button!" Dakin flung back. "Yuh low-down coward, why didn't yuh keep yore mouth shut!"

"Come on, Tom!" Gill shouted. "We can make it over the top. They mustn't see the ape."

Dakin came on in a burst of speed. When he was three or four horse-lengths away Gill lifted his six-gun and fired three times. Dakin threw up his arms, fell backward from the saddle of his rearing horse, struck the edge of the ledge and disappeared from sight.

Gill dragged his own horse around and came on, shouting for the ape to run. But Half-and-Half, in a mouthing fury, trotted toward Gill. Gill tried to shout orders to the man. But the giant set his right hand against Gill's horse, his left against the cliff wall, and heaved with his mighty shoulders.

Gill and his horse shot off the ledge and downward, out of sight. There was a wailing cry, a thick thudding sound, a rattle of rocks, then startled silence.

The giant came running back. Ward and Tyle were out of the cave now. Past Half-and-Half's huge shoulders Ward saw another rider coming up the ledge path. Worth Hysinger! He shouted at her, but the bulking body of the half-breed seemed to blockade his voice. The man's hands were reaching.

"He'll twist yuh—he'll twist yuh!" Tyle shouted in terror. "He'll break yore back and throw yuh over!"

Ward set his back against the sunlit rock wall. Half-and-Half stopped in front of him, grimacing in animal hatred. Ward lifted his

knee, shot his right boot out against the man, and shoved.

Half-and-Half staggered backward. One of his naked feet went over the edge. Then the other. He dropped, but caught with one elbow and one hand. Then he was coming up again.

A shot sounded from across the canyon. Flame lanced faintly in the shade. The giant grunted. Slowly his holds let go and he toppled backward and out of sight. . . .

BACK along, the ledge, where the trail branched, at the head of the canyon, Ward, Tyle, and Worth Hysinger met Moller the foreman of No. 6, Sheriff Wallace, a deputy sheriff, Blaine, superintendent of the great ranch, and Carlos Pompa.

"Me too," said Carlos, and grinned sheepishly at Ward.

Finally Warren Abbott rode slowly up, a rifle across his legs.

"Lest there be some mistake and wrong accusations, gentlemen," he said in his stuffed-shirt formality, "it was I who—er—shot the—ah—animal-man that Dakin told us about. To think that old Flicker fathered that thing. I had never known." He regarded Ward. "Mr. Nickerson," he said, "I shall make trespass charges against you in court. It is my law of the Medes and Persians, irrevocable."

"And I'm takin' you in, Mr. Abbott," said Sheriff Wallace with relish, "to answer a charge of murder—shootin' that feller."

"Certainly," said Abbott. "A formality we must all go through with. I haven't the faintest apprehension but that the jury will clear me. My shot saved the lives of Mr. Nickerson, no doubt, and of the other man—Tyle, is it? Besides, the brute-man was a trespasser on my country."

In town, the justice of the peace fined Ward a dollar and remitted the costs. Warren Abbott used his influence and was quickly tried for murder at a special term of court. He wanted to get it off his mind so he could go to the cities. As was to be expected, the jury found him not guilty, without leaving the box. Abbott thanked the jurors, not especially for freeing him, but with a nod for spending their time. Then he turned to Ward, who was present as a witness.

"Mr. Nickerson, I am in need of a chief range rider on the Rod-and-Compass. I offer you the job. Practically speaking, you may name your own salary and other emoluments."

It was one of the big surprises of Ward's life. A train of thought started up. To be next to the superintendent in pay and importance on the great Rod-and-Compass ranch, to be associated with Warren Abbott and his "empire" and the fame of it, such as it was! And a lifetime job.

Ward looked around and met Worth Hysinger's gray eyes. They were neither negative nor affirmative, but just steady.

Ward turned back to the big, waiting ranchman. He shook his head.

"Reckon not, Abbott. I've got my own little ranch to look after, and I'm takin' over the management of the Hysinger place. They'll take all my time. And anyhow, I'd rather be outside the wire."

Ward and Worth rode home together. Albert Tyle was with them. Ward told her he was hiring Tyle to work on the Hysinger place.

"Only," said the little man, "I aim to go back to that town and clear myself with the law about shootin' Lee Hyatt. It was in self-defense. He fired first."

"I can swear to that," said Ward.

"Just want to have a clean record," said Tyle, "so's not to be a shadder flittin' to and fro the rest of my days."

"There's one thing I want very much to know," said Worth Hysinger. "I saw Gill and Dakin and the wild man go over the cliff, down into the jungle of laurel and wild mahogany. I saw the loose talus rock cover them. Was—is that what happened to Buddy?"

"Yes'm," said Tyle frankly, and Ward nodded.

"I'm glad to know," she said gently. She looked at the long wire stretching through the country, glittering and winking in the sunlight. "I won't hate it so much now," she said, "since Abbott wasn't exactly to blame about Buddy."

And when she looked around at Ward, he knew that the scorn was gone from her eyes, or from his own imagination, if that was where it had been all the time.

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Next Issue: Clint Gregg, cowtown newspaper printer, proves he's no tumbleweed when he fights for justice in SHOWDOWN RIDES THE RIVER, a Punch-Packed Complete Novelet by Walker A. Tompkins!

The cowman saw Whitey Sloan blinking his eyes in the glare of light

OLD TIMER

By STEPHEN PAYNE

Veteran ranchman Whitey Sloan thought he'd try farmin' stuff, but you can't teach an old cow dog new tricks!

WHITEY SLOAN, known as the Old Timer on the 7 X outfit's range, had rehearsed what he was going to say to the boss. But somehow when he was alone with Bill Dawson in the small office, the words stuck in his throat. Whitey had worked for this grand old man so many years that all his interests in life were tied up with Dawson and the 7 X. Breaking away was—well, heaps tougher'n he figured.

He shifted from one booted foot to the other, fingered his thin gray mustache, tugged his droopy old hat down on his bald head, and finally fished a letter from the inside pocket of his unbuttoned vest and shoved it at the grizzled ranchman who was regarding him with a sharp and suspicious interest.

"Read it! It's the second one I've got from ol' Jim. The first set me thinkin'. Jim's got the right idea. This one sort of clinched it."

Bill Dawson scanned the letter and quoted from it:

"I'm living with my daughter, her husband and their kids on a little farm and it's sure an old man's dream. You'd love it, Whitey, like I do, and I'm hoping you'll buy in with me."

"This Jim Anson was a riding partner of yours in the old days?" the ranchman inquired.

"That's right, Bill. In them good old days even before I met up with you." Whitey's eyes of washed-out blue were suddenly bright. "Sa-ay, lemme tell you some of the things me and Jim went through together when we was wild young punchers."

"Another time. You're planning to settle down with Jim on a farm? On a farm?"

The pretty speech Whitey had planned was lost as completely as a bronc rider with a loose saddle.

"Why, yes," he stammered. "You see, a man's jus' got to stop a-workin' for wages and pitch a camp of his own some day."

He squirmed uncomfortably, for he had helped Dawson build up the 7 X from scratch, and now Bill Dawson's piercing eyes were hard to meet.

"There's been lots of talk lately about old men 'knocking off to take it easy.'" A smile creased the corners of the old man's firm mouth. "As if that was the smart thing for 'em to do."

"That's right," Whitey agreed quickly. "These yearlings I'm workin' with, Bill, keep remindin' me how ancient I'm gettin' and how I ought to get a change and some fun before I kick off. That, along with ol' Jim's letters, kinda got me. Not as I really think of myself or of Jim Anson as bein' old. Thirty years ago he got married, and I'd lost all track of him till his first letter. In it he said he'd lost his wife and had one daughter. This second one told more. Jim and me used to be awful close, Bill."

Dawson nodded. "Have you told the boys you're quitting 7 X?" he asked.

"No, sir!" Whitey said with emphasis. "I could take their razzin' all right, yet it'll be a heap sight simpler if I dodge it. Curly'd be slappin' his leg and chucklin' fit to bust a rib. 'So cow punchin's a dog's life, Whitey? Reckon there's a heap of dog about you, you've always took to it so strong.' Lot of that sort of stuff, boss. If you'll give me my wages, I'll slip out quiet and you'll tell the bunch 'So long' for me."

Dawson frowned, before he spoke.

"You've got real money coming, old timer, and I'm a bit short, so suppose I give you one thousand dollars now, and after I ship some beef—"

"Sure," Whitey agreed briefly.

Some moments later he pocketed a big roll of bills and his voice was husky as he squeezed Bill Dawson's hand hard. Turning, he hurried at his rolling, stilted cowboy walk across the dark yard to the stable, and led out his own private saddle horse, a leggy roan.

UNKNOWN to the other cowboys and ranch hands, he had earlier packed a war sack with a few precious items and cached it in a manger. He retrieved the sack and tied it in front of his outmoded saddle, behind which slicker and coat were tied. With a queer lump in his scrawny throat and a mist in his eyes he somehow could not wipe away with his bandanna, he swung up and prodded the roan out of the 7 X yard.

"Doggone! If it wasn't for ol' Jim beggin' me to come join him, I couldn't cut 'er. He's plumb right though. Feller my age is 'bout through. Got to have a little campin' spot he can call his own home."

The silent stars that had winked understandingly upon the old hand on a thousand different nights while he circled around a bedded herd, now looked austerely on the slouch hat and warped shoulders and bat wing chaps of the man riding away from the ranch and range he loved.

The stars were still bright when he took the Indian Trail over the great mountain range. Some day a highway would run here, but now it was nothing more than a game and pack horse trail, yet one to shorten Whitey's long journey to what he called "the Valley," by fifty miles.

By sundown of the next day he had put the smell of wild flowers and of pines behind him; he had put the mountains behind him, and all of the terrain had changed. Here the road ran between wire fences, and plowed fields rolled away to right and left.

He saw small bands of sheep, and more hogs and chickens than he'd imagined were in the whole world. He smelled alfalfa and fruit orchards and there was a strangeness about the neat frame buildings. Too darned civilized, and what a gosh awful lot of them!

The horses were all big work teams, fat and strong, and quite unlike the cayuses cowmen used for saddle stock. The cattle? Small dairy herds, all right in their way, and necessary, too. But to a fellow who never milked a cow if he could avoid it, and had wrangled the wild Texas cattle long years ago and then had seen them grow into the fine beef herds, dairy cows just weren't real cattle.

At dusk he rode into the town of Valley.

Following its main street he felt eyes, both of pedestrians and of farmers in buggies and wagons and automobiles, heavy on him. It was as if he was a curiosity, something out of the past. Like an ox team and covered wagon, like a herd of buffalo, like a mountain trapper, like—why, like a cowpuncher of the old trail-driving days—a survivor of an era which in this fertile land was gone forever.

At home he hadn't felt out of place, or out of time, but here he felt acutely self-conscious. He didn't belong!

The roan turned in at a livery stable where the chubby young hostler gave horse and rider a long, appraising stare.

"When you get done gawkin', tell me where-at's Jim Anson's place?" Whitey said, annoyed.

"Anson? Oh! He's the old grandpa who lives with Tom Calloway. Let's see now, where is Calloway's farm? You better stay here tonight and hunt it up by daylight."

"Reckon I had," Whitey agreed. And under his breath, "I got to get used to this and make new friends."

However when he left town soon after sunrise he still felt as lost as a lone steer on a sheep range. He had known this lower country would be warmer than the mountains, but he hadn't expected the heat to sort of wrap itself 'round him. The air, too, seemed to have absorbed all the smells of growing things and to rest heavily on the man and his horse.

Nevertheless, anticipation brightened his leathery face when at last he turned off the road through a wire gate to a set of buildings bordered by shade trees. In the background was an apple and cherry orchard, and there were chicken houses and hog pens, a huge barn and, sho' 'nuff, a herd of milk cows grazing in a pasture Whitey Sloan would have called a good-sized corral.

The frame house had recently been painted, so its white walls and red roof looked mighty neat. A tawny cat fuzzed its tail and scuttled out of sight as if the old timer and his horse were enemies, and a little girl stopped her play with her small brother to stare at him as if he was something from a story book which she hadn't actually believed real until now.

"Hi, kids? Where's your grandpa?" It wouldn't be long now before he saw old Jim!

"He's laying down," the girl said.

"What's that?" said Whitey very sharply. "How come?"

A young woman with something white bound around her dark hair came from the cherry orchard. She was a right well set-up girl with pink cheeks and nice blue eyes, and she carried two large baskets of cherries as easily as if she'd been a man.

She looked at the cowman with patent astonishment as he swung down a bit stiffly and advanced with his dust-coated hat in his hand.

"I take it you're June Calloway?"

"I'm Mrs. Calloway," the woman said briefly as if to set this stranger in his place.

A little of Whitey's warmth and joy at meeting Jim's daughter went out of him, but his grin didn't vanish.

"Happens I'm your daddy's old time partner, Mrs. Calloway. You've heard him talk about Whitey Sloan?"

"Oh! Whitey! Talk about you! I should say he does. He's been hoping you'd come. You'll find him in, through the living room, first door to your right. But don't excite him."

WHITEY shuffled into the house, turned through the door at his right, and stopped and stared wide-eyed at the rather fleshy man stretched out on a bed in a tiny, airless room. The man's eyes were closed. He was white-haired, and his furrowed old face had an unnatural color, as if he stayed too much indoors. Jim Anson all right, but gosh! he'd changed! Whitey had been remembering him as of thirty-odd years ago. Now shock ran through him and left him strangely disturbed.

Jim's eyes flicked open and he bounced off the bed.

"Whitey," he yelled. "You thunderin' old hoss thief! Am I glad to see you. Put 'er there!"

"Same here! How you makin' out, you long-horned son of a coyote?"

For three minutes they loudly insulted one another, and then Whitey asked, "What you layin' round this way for?"

"Aw, just off my feed a little. I'll be hunky now. How you like this place? Look, through this window you can see the mountains. And it's so quiet. Just the place for us to settle down in our old age."

June Calloway's shadow darkened the door.

"Daddy," her troubled voice warned, "you mustn't get excited."

"Heck! Stop worritin' about what that pill-pusher said, June. Now Whitey's here, I'm rarin' to go. Let's put your horse in the barn and I'll show you 'round."

And with the enthusiasm of a youthful cowboy showing off his new saddle to his comrades, Jim Anson showed his old friend the farm. Alfalfa here, small grains there,

vegetables yonder, and of course Whitey had noticed the berry bushes and fruit trees.

Tom Calloway had bought in with Jim when Tom married June nigh six years ago. Tom was sure a hustler. Today he was helping a neighbor, so he in turn would get help harvesting alfalfa, but he'd be home come evenin'. Three years back the grasshoppers had eaten everything on the farm, every danged thing, and was that a socker. It had put 'em in debt all over again.

"Now that's just like the cow business," said Whitey. "A feller thinks he's got it made, then comes a hard winter or a drought or—"

"Yeh, yeh," Jim agreed, and with glowing pride he showed Whitey the chickens and the hogs and the dairy herd, Whitey pretending an interest he simply didn't and couldn't feel. Not yet anyhow.

The men had been closely tagged by the two small children, Myrtle and tiny Jimmy. Their big-eyed wonder and curiosity about the queer dressed, odd-looking visitor had soon worn off, as well as their awe of him. By the time they were turning back to the house for dinner, Whitey had Myrtle's hand fast in his and Jimmy was perched on his shoulder.

The meal over, June, looking still more worried, strongly advised her father to rest. Jim Anson would have none of it.

"You want the cherries taken to town. Well, me and Whitey'll take them in and sell them. Take that dry cow which ain't any good and sell her to the butcher, too."

The two men hitched a team to a light spring wagon and loaded in it the cherries, some garden truck and dozens of eggs.

"I'll get my horse and haze the beef herd 'long behind your grub wagon, Jim," Whitey chuckled.

"Grub wagon? Hi! I've nigh forgot range stuff. Been away from it so long. Where'll we camp t'night, old timer? Looks like I'd have to be the pilot as well as the cook."

"And me the horse jingler as well as the cowpunchin' crew." Whitey laughed. "Reckon I can handle that big herd of one cow?"

"Not on horseback," said Jim, and poked the other in the short ribs. "That old bossy never seen a cowpuncher on a horse. She'd balk and you couldn't drive her no place. We'll lead her behind the wagon."

"You mean it, Jim?" Whitey asked blankly.

Jim did, and presently they were on the way with the haltered old Holstein trailing behind the rig.

"Wonder what the 7 X boys and Bill Dawson'd think if they'd see me now?" Whitey mused. "Salty jerky, how they'd hoorah me!"

The trip was something novel and he really enjoyed every part of this new adventure except meeting Doctor Harney, who exhibited deep concern in seeing Jim Anson cavorting around like a young man.

"See here, whatever your name is," Harney said, confronting Whitey, "Anson's got to take care of himself."

His tone riled the easy-going old cowhand.

"Bet you he's happier'n he's been in years. Shuckins, Doc, layin' round and imaginin' he's sick'd sure kill him."

"I can see you're a tough old ranger who wouldn't understand. But didn't Mrs. Calloway tell you that her father's heart—"

"Bunk!" snorted Whitey. "His heart's in the right place, if that's what you mean!"

As if to prove June's and the doctor's worry unfounded in the days that immediately followed, Jim Anson continued to astonish his daughter with renewed vitality and zest for life.

"Your being here is the best tonic imaginable for Dad," June admitted to Whitey. "Such wonderful plans he's making for the future—with you."

BUT Whitey soon became aware that Jim's son-in-law, Tom Calloway, did not share their glowing plans. The old hand had been eager to make friends with the young farmer, only to discover that they had nothing in common and never would savvy one another. But Smoky Hills! how Tom could turn off the work!

Except in caring for the horses Whitey had no enthusiasm for this sort of work, though he wasn't telling his friend how thoroughly he disliked it. One afternoon when the two oldsters were spraying fruit trees and berry bushes, Whitey tried to make a game of it.

"You say they got some kind of bugs? Like lice or ticks or scab on cows, eh? Well," indicating a small apple tree, "here's a mangy yearlin' with his hoofs bogged in the mud so we can't haze him through the dippin' vat. Bring up your spray gun, Jim, and we'll douse him right here. Hey, now look out he don't hook you!"

Jim Anson failed to warm up to the game.

"'Hook you'? Can't you think of nothin' but cows and hosses, Whitey?"

"Uh? Seems you're 'most as wrapped up in this farm work as Tom. And sa-ay, seems to me, Tom and June never stop workin' and never, never get through."

"What of it, Whitey? The chores must be done before breakfast and after supper. And

June has to patch and darn and make clothes for the kids whenever she gets a minute besides."

"Ye-ah?" drily. "I thought I'd seen ranch women chained to jobs, but I hadn't seen nothin'. Don't June never get any fun or—"

Jim straightened from pumping the spray gun, gazed toward the neat house.

"Well," he said "me and Tom figured she was 'titled to a nice home, so we got that shack worked over and painted this spring." He snapped his fingers with annoyance. "A mistake, when we didn't have the dough. We borrowed a thousand bucks from a neighbor, Roy Dagwell, on a demand note. Now he's howlin' for it and threatenin' to put an attachment on everything that's loose."

"What the dickens?" exclaimed Whitey.

"Not as there is much loose," Jim went on with sudden rancor. "On account of them tough years, there's a big plaster on this place and stock. That Dagwell debt sorta eats on June, makes her keep a-humping to gather every egg and every cherry and—"

"Jim," Whitey interrupted impulsively. "Happens I can take this Dagwell off your necks. Money never meant a lot to me, 'cause I never needed much of anything for myself. You take this roll and—"

"No! We— I couldn't take— We got pride, ain't we? Forget it, old horse."

"Keep your shirt on, Jim. Remember you mentioned me buyin' in with you?"

"Uh-huh. Now I had an idea if we raised enough grain and hay this year, we'd feed a bunch of lambs. You to buy 'em, Whitey."

"Thunderation, Jim, you mean steers, don't you? I'd get a kick out of feedin' young steers. But sheep! You sure have got a long way off the trail for an ol' cowman."

"More money in sheep feedin'," stated Jim doggedly. And then, eagerly, "How you likin' it, Whitey? Reckon you can plant yourself here and be happy like me?"

"Sure, Jim, sure!" agreed Whitey, but although he was honestly trying to fit himself into this new life, he simply could not wipe his old interests out of mind.

About now he ought to be drifting the young 7 X steers off the flats and back up into the hills. Yes, and throwing the cows and calves on the Forest Reserve. How were the yearling heifers on Blue Fork doing? Getting late for poison weed to be dangerous, yet a fellow ought to be keeping an eye on it in many different spots on the 7 X far-flung range.

Who the Sam Hill was filling his boots right now? Doggone it! Whoever was taking over his job would get his string of saddle ponies. Jarred on a man something terrible just to think of some other geezer riding his pet horses!

At dusk of the next day, he was dawdling at the stable for a few moments after feeding and watering the farm horses and his own roan, when he heard voices in the nearby cow barn where Tom Calloway was milking.

"But, Dagwell, we can't pay you."

"I'm going to get tough if you don't, Tom!" Dagwell sounded belligerent.

"Aw, lay off me!" Tom retorted. "Can't you see I've got an awful load? Interest and taxes and grub bills and the old man to take care of."

"Yeh?" said Dagwell. "Yet I seen Jim busyin' himself a heap lately. Who's the other old freak?"

Whitey Sloan doubled his right fist.

"Old freak!"

"Friend of Jim's," said Tom. "And though I don't want to beef, it's Jim's fault that June and me have got that old pensioner boarding on us. He's no darned good at farm work and never will be."

"'Pensioner boarding on us.'" Whitey gritted. "Doggone his hide, I'll—No, I won't! Punchin' his nose'd make things heaps worse."

SILENTLY he moved away from the stable and on to the house. It was the hour for his customary gab fest with old Jim, when, eyes aglow, they relived adventures of long ago. But tonight Jim Anson had put himself to bed and, judging from his low moans, he seemed to be in pain.

"Matter, old head?" Whitey asked solicitously. Bending closer, he added, "Don't you know me?"

"Sure," mumbled Jim, yet Whitey realized his mind was far from clear.

With a sudden happy idea taking shape in his own mind, the old hand got a tablet of paper and a pencil.

"Little somethin' I want you to put down on paper just like I tell it to you, Jim."

The man's hand shook a good deal as he wrote what Whitey dictated and eventually signed his name.

"Know what you said, Jim?" Whitey asked, when he had the tablet again.

"Eumnn," Jim mumbled. "Let me feel your hand, Whitey. You 'member that black night when you and me was tryin' to—to— It's like that now. Dar's. Awful dark."

The voice trailed off and Whitey felt Jim's hand go limp in his. A lump welled in his throat, choking him, and then he heard Myrtle at the door.

"Grandpa asleep, Uncle Whitey?" She asked.

"Asleep? Yes honey, he's asleep. He'll sleep a long, long time. S'pose you go call your mama while I make talk on the telephone. Though what good the doc can do is more'n I know."

Three days later Whitey saddled his roan and tied his war sack in front of his saddle. Then he stopped and gathered Jimmy and Myrtle, one in each arm. They were tearful now, not because Grandpa was gone, but because they knew Uncle Whitey was leaving them and the farm.

"See what I've got for you," soothed the old hand. "Boy-size quirt I braided myself for you, Jimmy; braided belt that'll just fit you, Myrtle."

The children were finding joy in these wonderful presents when June Calloway walked over to Whitey and his horse. She was dabbing at her eyes and she had trouble with her voice as she began to speak.

"I can't begin to thank you for all you did for Dad those last days of his life. I'm sorry, too, that Tom and I were so busy we didn't seem to have time to be friendly. Is it too late to tell you that you helped me? Helped me so much?"

Whitey held out his hand to June.

"I'm mighty glad if I was of some use. Nothin' turned out like Jim and me figured, yet maybeso things'll be a mite easier for you from now on, June."

"Oh, they will, Whitey. They will! You see, Daddy gave us the nicest surprise! Among his things was a note he'd written, saying he'd been holding out some money for an emergency. A 'cache' he called it. The note told where we'd find it, buried in a tin can."

"Well, I never!" exclaimed Whitey. "Jus' like good ol' Jim. Fifty, sixty dollars, maybe?"

"*You'll* be surprised, too! Dad left us nine hundred dollars! Almost enough to pay off Dagwell!"

"I know how you and Tom want to get that skinner off your necks, June, so take this hundred bucks. Yes, you must take it, and let it halfway pay for my board and keep I never really earned. Good-by and good luck."

He stepped spryly into his saddle and kicked the roan into a lope.

Bill Dawson was a night owl. At one o'clock in the morning he was in his den reading a mystery story when somebody rapped softly, and he heard, "Hi, Bill!"

The cowman opened his door and saw Whitey Sloan blinking his washed-out eyes in the glare of light. There was the dust of a long trail on him, and his weariness somewhat dimmed the eagerness and the glow of anticipation on his lined old face.

Dawson indicated a chair, and chuckled inaudibly before he said, "I thought you'd pulled up stakes for good, Old Timer."

"Well, well," stammered Whitey, and then blurted, "You see, Bill, ol' Jim cashed in and I couldn't go that farmin' stuff without him. So I—So I—"

"Sorry to hear about Jim," Bill Dawson said, and waited for the cowhand to go on.

"So I," said Whitey desperately, "dropped back here just to—to tell whoever you put in my place some things about the range, and the cattle, that a new man had ought to savvy."

The ranchman's eyes were twinkling as he nodded.

"That's fine. You've got some new plans for yourself, Whitey?"

"We-ll, we-ll. Sure I'm figurin' to—Bill, who's fillin' my boots here on 7X?"

Dawson couldn't go on with the game. He clapped a hand on the knotty old timer's shoulder.

"Nobody! And nobody's thrown a saddle on one of your string of ponies."

"Nobody!" echoed Whitey, eyes and face lighting. "Nobody!" Joy lifted his voice. "Bill, does that mean—"

"It means exactly what you think it does! I knew you'd be back."

"Uh? Old socks, you couldn't have knowed that. Not for sure nohow."

"Not for sure?" Dawson was laughing at him. "Whitey, you can't teach an old dawg new tricks, and you're an old cow dog!"

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Next Issue's Headliners: THE LAW OF AVERAGES, a complete Tombstone and Speedy novel by W. C. Tuttle—RANGERS RIDE ALONE, a Navajo Raine novelet by Jackson Cole—SHOWDOWN RIDES THE RIVER, an action novelet by Walker A. Tompkins—and many others!

The Cowboy HAD A WORD for it!

By CHUCK STANLEY

ONE DAY the pilgrim strolled down from the bunkhouse for another gab session with the old maverick, and was surprised to find that the "mossy-horn" was lively and chipper. Instead of meeting him on the porch of his little shack, the old-timer was leaning against the pole corral, and saying:

"Son, I figger I've been riding the hurricane deck of a rocking chair just about long enough! Today I scheduled a palaver on some of the wildflowers and trees of this here Southwest country, and I reckon the best way to show you what I mean is to fork a bronc and hit out onto the prairie. Most folks figure there's nothing colorful or poetic about sage and cactus, but I hope to confound them unbelievers."

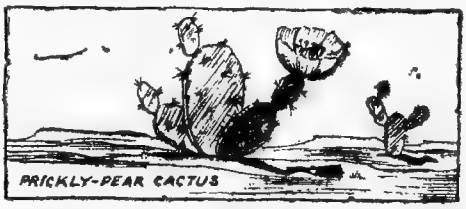
Nature at First Hand

The young tenderfoot was eager to learn about the beauties of Nature at first hand, and under the guidance of such an experienced teacher, particularly since this was one side of the cowboy lexicon of words that he had not even scratched.

They rigged a couple of easy-going animals, and were soon putting out of the ranch yard and moving across the home graze toward the stretches of prairie and desert beyond. When they were well away from the buildings, and surrounded by the growth of the range, the old-timer began:

"Most folks speak about the cactus country as though it were a desert, but if you're a clever range rider or 'desert rat', you can often made the cactus country take care of you."

The cow-country patriarch pointed out a "prickly pear" cactus, and they paused so



that the "Arbuckle" could examine it. "The 'prickly pear' is sometimes known as the 'Indian fig', and like the fruit of a good many cacti, can be used as a food. Most of you Easterners are familiar with the 'prickly pear' cactus, because it's the one people have a habit of planting in a bowl of sand or pebbles and sticking in the kitchen window."

The pilgrim was delighted with this information, but amazed when he learned that there were about two hundred and fifty species of "prickly pear." He was more than surprised, too, to discover that the plants produced interesting yellowish and reddish yellow flowers.

The Hedge-Hog Cactus

His attention was next called to a round cactus with many spines sticking out at all angles, and with yellow and rose flowers on the top.

"Got a name for that?" asked the old-timer.

"Looks like a pineapple to me," laughed the tenderfoot.

"That's pretty close," agreed the "mossy-horn," "but the waddies call it 'hedge-hog' cactus. If you've run into any of them little

Our Pilgrim Learns the Lore of Prairie Trees!

animals, you'll recognize the connection. There are eight or nine types of 'hedgehog' for your horse to run into or spill you onto, depending on the calibre of your riding." The range mentor chuckled.

Named According to Shapes

The young pilgrim then learned that a good many of the cactus plants, described in the Natural History books by long Latin names, derived their Western popular descriptions from the shapes they took.

One of the more familiar of these was the "barrel" cactus, which was shaped something like a beer barrel, and the liquid that could be squeezed from the pulp inside often meant the difference between life and death to waddies lost in the desert.

Another colorful cactus plant was the so-called "organ cactus", which sent up twenty or thirty trunks of varying heights and widths from a single base, with the result that the full-grown plant looked like a church organ with its varied pipes.

"What's that tall tree over there?" asked the "Arbuckle" as they resumed their riding.

"That's a mesquite," replied the old-timer. "Most folks think that a mesquite is a little scrubby thing, and most times it is. But you

let one of them trees stick its roots down into wet ground, like along some of the big rivers in Texas, New Mexico and Arizona, and it'll shoot up to fifty or sixty feet. You've heard tell of how them meat packers in Chicago can get everything out of the pig but its squeal, when they go into the slaughter-house. Well, I reckon this here mesquite is just about the same to the Mexicans and Indians in the Southwest."

The old-timer then went on to explain how the tree was called the "honey pod" after the long seed cases from four to nine inches in length which supplied the popular "mesquite beans." These were the important raw materials that often went into the famous Mexican "frijoles" or other bean dishes.

Mesquite Shoots

Early in the Spring, range cattle frequently fed on "mesquite shoots", the young, tender green seedings that later turned into greenish, fragrant flowers. The mesquite also supplied fuel and building materials in the desert.

When a newcomer arrives in the range country, his more experienced neighbor takes him on a wood-foraging expedition. Much of the best wood is in the root system which often sends dozens of roots down into the ground as far as sixty feet in search of water, and when this wood is cut, it makes good building and fencing materials.

Many a Western community can point to fence posts, railroad ties, the corner posts of adobe houses, furniture, wooden wheels, and paving blocks that are made of "mesquite roots." And the surplus is turned into firewood or charcoal. Indeed the mesquite is the cowboy's friend.

Some of the smaller "mesquites" are known as the "screw-bean" or "screw-pod" mesquites. The chief difference is in the shape of the pod which curls up like a screw. However when it is straightened out, it has a length of from twelve to twenty inches, and twice as many beans as the "honey-pod."

The Palo Verde

The next frontier tree to come to the attention of our two riders was the "palo verde."

Our ranch and range student was surprised to find that this tree was related to the more familiar acacia, and that it was a green-barked tree with almost no leaves. The leaves were about an inch long, and looked very much like locusts or grasshoppers crouching against the "palo verde." For this reason they were known to the cowboys as "honey-locust" leaves.

The tree had beautiful flowers, however, which were reminiscent of the little yellow roses of the East.

Another bean-bearing tree that proved interesting to the young "Arbuckle" was the "retama." The horses headed for the "retama" tree as though it were a giant magnet, and immediately began browsing on the foliage. The fruit was dark orange-brown in color.

Texas Ebony

"Now you know why the waddies call this tree the 'horse-bean'," laughed the old maverick. "But look—here's an excellent example of a 'Texas ebony.'"

The elderly range rider spurred his animal in the direction of the beautiful tree that

rose to thirty feet in height along one of the bluffs lining the river.

The tenderfoot realized that like most other ebonies, this tree supplied wood that was valuable for fine cabinet work, and was almost indestructible when it was used as foundation wood, or otherwise came in contact with the ground.

"This Texas ebony tree sure adds a lot of variety to the cowboy's menu," pointed out the old-timer. "He has a number of different names for its products. For instance, if you're hankering for some 'Texas string-beans' you'll get them on this tree. Ranch cooks that are looking for them, pick the pods before they're fully ripened, and boil them like regular string beans. Then you can have 'Texas frijoles', which come from the beans when they're fully ripened. And if you have your taste set for 'Texas coffee', the old ebony tree will fill the bill, too."

"How do you figure that?" asked the "greener."

"Well," explained the "mossy-horn", "these here Panhandle and Big Bend 'cocineros', they just roast them beans and grind them up in a coffee grinder, and the brew you get from them is some of the finest you've ever tasted!"

The Little Bean Tree

The "greenhorn" reflected on the assets of the Texas ebony, and went along to make the acquaintance of a much smaller tree nearby. This was the "frijolito", or "little bean" tree.

Because of the bright scarlet seeds that were concentrated around the pods, the cowboys also referred to this representative of their rangeland as the "coral-bean" tree. Like some of the other trees just visited, it grew best along stream borders.

Nearby he discovered a tree with small apples growing on it, and he asked whether they were good for eating. For answer the old-timer plucked several of the apples and ate one of them. The pilgrim learned that it was a "prairie crabapple" tree, which was also known by the name of the "Soulard crabapple" tree after the man who discovered it.

The mentor explained to his ardent young student that the lives of many of the pioneers had been made much pleasanter by apple jellies and preserves made from the fruit of these trees, and their close kin, the "wild crabapple" tree, which grew nearby.

For Bows and Arrows

A tree that had supplied many Plains Indians with the raw materials for their bows

and arrows was the "hackberry". Later on when the wagon of the pioneer and the cattle trail driver moved along the Indian war paths, the cowboys used the wood for axletrees, the spokes and naves of wheels, and for making musical instruments.

"It was a plumb helpful tree," the old-timer declared, and it sure had its other uses too. "For instance, the waddy had 'hackberry dye' from the roots, and could use it to dye his fancy shirts a bright yellow. 'Hackberry tanbark' was an important item in helping to tan the leather for saddles and stirrups, and one way to keep saddles and boots plenty limber was by using 'hackberry oil', pressed out of the stones of the fruit."

The young rider was willing to agree that this tree, besides the pleasure it gave merely by growing in the desert places, was a mighty important range asset.

The "Pinon" or "Nut-Pine"

But there was another familiar term he had heard a number of the "waddies" use in the bunkhouse, and on the roundup. They spoke of many "pinon" trees. He asked the old-timer what was meant by that.

"The 'pinon' is the 'nut-pine' tree," explained the mossback. "There are four of them on both sides of the Mexican Border, and they are so-called because they supply the Indians and Mexicans, and our own trappers and ranchers, with seeds or 'nuts' that are rich in oils, and have good keeping qualities that permit storing them through a winter."

The young tenderfoot dismounted from his horse, and "ground-reined" the animal, while he leaned against one of the trees, and settled himself to make notes on the various additions to the cowboy lexicon coming from the "pinon" or "nut-pine" tree.

He discovered that there was "pinon mush" made by pounding the seeds in a stone bowl and "pinon flour", which was a finer render-

ing of the crushed seeds, used for making "pinon cakes."

"The 'lodge pole' pine was also an important member of the pine tree family," declared the old-timer. "Like you know, the Indians first used it for building their lodges or 'tepees'. The poles were also known as 'travois' poles, because a pair of them were used for the Indian's horse-drawn pack."

The Useful Tamarack

He went on to explain that the 'lodge pole' pine of the cowboy and Indian is really the tamarack tree, and was so useful for the Indian, and also as the raw material for corrals, originally built in rounded form because of the supple trunks of the saplings, which permitted them to be bent into a complete bow without splitting or cracking.

The sun was sinking toward the West as the pilgrim made his notes on the pine trees, and picked up the dragging reins of his horse. He swung aboard the saddle, and reined around to head for home. As he jogged along, the old maverick asked:

"What do you think of the kind of trees we have out here in our cowboy desert? A lot more useful than you figured, I reckon?"

The greenhorn laughed, then remarked:

"From the looks of things, the Indians, the Mexicans and the early settlers here were able to get about everything they needed out of a tree or a bush except something to wear. They could build shelters, eat the beans, make cakes out of the mash, and even coffee."

Clothes from Trees

The old-timer puffed on his pipe, leaned comfortably to one side of his saddle, then said:

"This here jaunt around among the trees and flowers has just about begun, hombre, but I don't want you to get home tonight figuring that the Injuns couldn't get no material for clothes out of these trees, because it just ain't so."

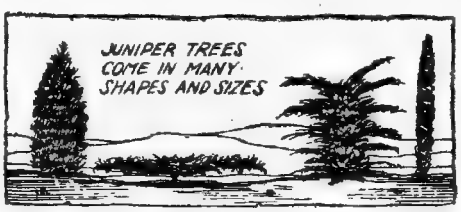
"How do you figure that?" the pilgrim inquired.

"Well," replied the "mossy-horn". "Next trip out we're going to look over some of the wildflowers and things that brighten up the life of a cowboy, and make the cows more comfortable and contented. Right then, I'm going to give you a look at a Western juniper. Yes-sirree, that's a tree. They talk about them Redwoods and Sequoias out there in California, but we'll match them right here in the Southwest with our Western juniper."

A Long Life-Span

The pilgrim was amazed to learn that while this tree never grew very tall it did have a life span of more than two thousand years, and often when most of the tree was ripped away or denuded by an avalanche, a single root would hold to a soil base, and new shoots would come out with each passing season.

"Them there trees supply the Indians, and some white folks with 'juniper cloth'. Some of the trappers and Indians call the stringy bark 'juniper yarn', and it sure works up into a useful cloth for them who like to use it. Of course, with the Indians not quite as tough as they used to be, maybe this here



'juniper cloth' ain't as stylish as it used to be, but the squaws still like to use it to make 'juniper mats', and 'juniper robes' out of it."

They were nearing the ranch house as the old-timer concluded his remarks on the qualities of the juniper tree and its contribution to the cowboy's life and lore, and the Arbuckle agreed that his ride had been definitely interesting and instructive. He was already looking forward to his next jaunt into the cowboy's wildflower paradise.

Our Tenderfoot Studies the Flowers of the West in

THE COWBOY HAD A WORD FOR IT

NEXT ISSUE!

He saw the fiery glow of fierce eyes

THE MEANEST MAN

By GUNNISON STEELE

Sam Radd didn't know which was worse—killing the banker, or telling the sheriff that his own partner had done it!

SAM RADD was a tall, bony-framed man who owned a half-interest with Bill Tolliver in a little outfit up in the Blacktop Hills. Now, as Radd rode into the town of Barrier, his shoulders were slumped and there was a worried light in his mild gray eyes.

As Radd came even with the sheriff's office, he glanced through a window and saw Sheriff Jard Catwick's heavy figure seated at his scarred desk. He started to ride on past, then shook his head somberly and reined in at the tie-bar. His movements were slow and heavy as he dismounted and entered the office.

Sheriff Catwick was a big, mustached, taciturn man. He had been scribbling on a piece of paper, but looked up sharply as Sam Radd entered.

"Hello, Sam," he said. "Have a chair."

Radd nodded, sat down opposite the sheriff. He kept turning his floppy old hat nervously in his callused hands. The worry was plain on his gray face.

"Somethin' on yore mind, Sam?" Sheriff Catwick asked.

Sam Radd nodded again, with obvious reluctance.

"Yes, there is, Sheriff," he said slowly. "I ain't slept much for the last three nights."

"What's the trouble?"

"Some things a man can run away from or hide from," Radd muttered. "But not from hisself. He's got to live with hisself till he dies."

"Well, now, I reckon that's a plumb fact." The sheriff frowned. "What'n tunket are yuh talkin' about, Sam?"

"About what won't let me sleep. About Bill Tolliver."

"Yore pardner, yuh mean? What's he done?"

"It was him that robbed the bank a month ago, and killed old Clay Farnum!" Sam Radd blurted.

Sheriff Catwick stiffened, staring at the man before him. His eyes narrowed coldly.

"Yuh shore of that, Sam?" he murmured.

Sam Radd nodded, dumb misery in his eyes.

"I wish I wasn't! Then I wouldn't have to be doin' what I'm doin'. I wouldn't have to be callin' myself a low-down, blabbin' skunk for turnin' my pardner in to the law."

"Never mind that! How yuh know it was Bill Tolliver that done it?"

Radd hesitated, turning his hat in his hands. He looked as if he wished bitterly that he could recall the words he had said.

ONE night a month ago old Clay Farnum, president of the Barrier Stockman's Bank, had been called to the door of his small house where he lived alone. There a hooded figure had jabbed a gun at the banker, forced him to accompany the hooded man through the dark streets to the bank. Then he had forced Farnum to open the bank vault.

As the hold-up thrust a sheaf of bank-notes into his shirt, the old banker had foolishly attacked him. The hooded man had smashed him to the floor with a blow from his gun-barrel. And then, as the old man lay stunned on the bank floor, the bandit had deliberately fired a shot into his chest.

Apparently suddenly gripped by panic, the killer had fled from the bank, having taken only the single bundle of currency. Farnum had lived just long enough to tell what had happened, then died. He hadn't recognized the killer. Furthermore, Sheriff Catwick had been unable to unearth a single clue.

"Speak out, Sam," the sheriff said sharply. "What makes yuh think it was Bill Tolliver that done it?"

"The night it happened," Radd said slowly, "Bill was alone at the ranch. I'd gone off into the hills to look for a bunch of strays, and when night caught me I made camp. That would give Bill his chance."

"But it's not proof."

"I'm comin' to that. A couple of days after it happened, I found this out in the barn where likely it had been dropped by accident."

Radd dropped a narrow strip of gummed paper on the desk. The paper was stamped with the words, "BARRIER STOCKMAN'S BANK." It had been used, the sheriff knew, to hold together a sheaf of bank-notes. He thoughtfully jabbed at it with a pencil.

"Is that all?"

"No, it ain't," Radd said doggedly. "If it had been . . . Well, Bill Tolliver was in bed with fever most of last week. He was delirious part of the time, and he done considerable talkin'. I couldn't help hearin' what he said, could I? I—well, dang it, he told just how he'd done it. Robbed the bank and killed Farnum, I mean. He told where he'd hid the money—under some hay, out in the barn. I had to be shore, so I went and looked."

"And the money was there?"

"Yeah, it was. Five hundred dollars, in twenty-dollar bills. I heard the bank had down the serial numbers of the money that was took. Bill wasn't at the house when I left this mornin', so I got one of the bills and brought it along. Here it is."

Sheriff Catwick looked closely at the twenty-dollar bill Radd handed him. Then he took from a desk drawer a slip of paper with some figures scrawled on it, and compared the figures with the serial number on the banknote.

"This is part of the bank money, all right," he said grimly. "Anything else?"

Radd shook his head glumly. "That's all. Like I said, I thought about it a long time before I made up my mind what I had to do. Me and Bill always got along, and I never suspected he'd do a thing like that, so when I found out I kind of went all to pieces for a while. Likely I won't sleep any better now than I did before, but anyhow I'll know I done my duty."

"Ain't but one way to do—the right way," the sheriff said brusquely. "And yuh'll be in line for the thousand-dollar reward the bank offered for the capture and conviction of the killer."

"I hadn't thought about any reward. It was just what was inside me that made me come here."

"That's up to you, whether yuh want it or not. Naturally, yuh'll have to swear to what yuh just told me. Yuh willin' to do that?"

"If I have to."

"Then I'll have a warrant swore out, and go bring Bill Tolliver in. Yuh crave to go along?"

"I'd rather not. I—I don't know how I'll face Bill. After all, he *was* my partner. No, I'll stay here in town."

"Suit yoreself." Catwick got to his feet. "Ought to be back with Bill before night."

Sam Radd nodded, got up and went out. He slowly crossed to a saloon, entered, ordered a drink. He stared morosely into the glass for a long moment before drinking the whisky. . . .

IT WAS almost sundown when Sheriff Catwick got back to town with Bill Tolliver. Tolliver was a big, dark-faced man, younger than Sam Radd. He rode straight in the saddle, looking with cold, contemptuous eyes at those in the street, his manacled hands on the saddle-horn before him. That was the way Bill Tolliver was—arrogant, confident, his bold eyes heaping insolence upon the world.

Radd watched as the sheriff and Tolliver dismounted before the sheriff's office, and went inside. Then he shook his head again, went out, and along the street. Now that the unpleasant task was over, nothing was to be gained by evasion or pretense. He went into the sheriff's office.

Bill Tolliver turned and looked at his partner. He said nothing, just stared at Radd, his lips curling with contempt, a wicked anger in his eyes.

"Bill," Radd said slowly, "I don't expect yuh to understand what I done."

"I understand, all right," Tolliver said coldly. "Get out of my sight. I don't like the stripes down yore back!"

"Mebbe yuh're right, Bill," Radd said gently, without apparent resentment. "I don't know which was the meanest—what I done, or what you done."

"I know who'll have the most regret," Tolliver said. "I almost feel sorry for yuh, Sam!"

That, Radd knew, was a threat. And Bill Tolliver was not the bluffing kind. Despite himself, Sam Radd felt a little shiver chase along his spine. He turned and went out. At the tie-rack he mounted his roan and headed out toward the Blacktops that bristled like the hair on a wolf's back along the northern horizon.

It was long after nightfall, although a full moon shone brightly, when he reached the Circle RT log cabin ranchhouse that huddled in the shadows of giant pines beside a noisy little stream. The Circle RT was not a big outfit, but it had made money for Radd and Tolliver. Many fertile meadows dotted the timbered foot-hills.

There was just one drawback. Driven down from the bleak highlands by a hard winter, packs of hungry, savage wolves were roaming the foot-hills in search of food. A good many calves had been lost to the fierce beasts, despite the partners' attempts to exterminate them.

Radd had not eaten since morning, but he found that he had small appetite. Suddenly remembering that he had neglected to ask Sheriff Catwick if he had found the cached bank money, he got up and went to the barn. The money was gone. Radd sighed deeply. That money was the main piece of evidence that would put a noose about Bill Tolliver's neck.

Sam Radd returned to the ranchhouse. He sat there in the dark for a long time, wondering if he had done the wise thing. . . .

It was almost noon the next day when Sheriff Catwick rode along the dim trail and stopped before the ranchhouse. The lawman was grim-faced and frowning as he looked at Radd.

"Yuh stay at home all night, Sam?" he asked abruptly.

"I shore did, Sheriff," Radd declared. "Somethin' wrong?"

"There shore as Tophet is. Bill Tolliver broke out of jail last night!"

Radd didn't say anything for a moment. He had thought about that possibility, for Bill Tolliver was a mighty hard man to handle. And every time he had thought about it he had felt that cold feeling along his spine. For neither was Tolliver a man to forget or forgive.

"How'd it happen?" Radd asked.

"Pried a bar off a window. But somebody had to slip somethin' to do the pryin' with. Yuh shore yore conscience didn't get to botherin' yuh?"

"My conscience has pestered me some, all right, like I expected it would. But if yuh mean, did I help Bill break jail, I didn't."

"No, I reckon not." Catwick sighed. "Well, anyway, he's gone. Figgered he might have headed out here."

"His best chance, looks like, would be to head over toward the Big Slates."

"If he was aimin' at a quick getaway, yeah!" said Catwick.

"What yuh mean?"

"You know, Sam, well as me, that Bill Tolliver—whatever he done—ain't one to forget when he's done dirt."

"I just done what I had to do," Radd said stubbornly. "Yuh said yoreself there wasn't but one way—the right way."

"That's a fact. Well, anyway, yuh better keep yore eye peeled till he's safe back in jail."

"I'll do that, though I reckon I can take care of myself."

Sheriff Catwick lifted his hand and rode away.

RADD sat down on the doorstep to ponder this new turn of events. But pretty soon an uneasy feeling came over him, like maybe unfriendly eyes were watching him from the hemming timber. He got up rather hastily and went inside.

He stayed in the house most of the afternoon, his gun close at hand. Radd was not a coward, but he just was not taking any chances with Bill Tolliver. Likely it wouldn't be long before Tolliver was behind bars again.

When he went out near sundown to do up the chores he was jittery as a jaybird. Again he had that feeling of being watched by unseen and hostile eyes. Once he heard a low sound in a nearby lodgepole thicket and could have sworn he saw the figure of a man fade back into the shadows. He was glad when he got back to the house.

He didn't make a light, but sat there in the darkness, straining eyes and ears. But he could hear only the wind in the pines, and the occasional weird hunting cry of an owl and, after a while, the wolves. Sometimes the eerie howling was dim and distant, sometimes near the cabin. Each night the huge pack, goaded by their ancient heritage of hunger, roamed the timbered ridges.

Always the melancholy sound had made Sam Radd shiver with revulsion. Tonight, however, the chant seemed to carry an added savagery and menace.

The dark room suddenly filled with moving, sinister forms.

Radd got up quickly, struck a match and applied it to a lamp. Hurriedly he shaded the windows, then barred front and back doors. Nerves, he told himself jeeringly—imagination—and yet he knew that the danger from Bill Tolliver, if he had not been recaptured, was very real.

He went back into the front room and sat down, his gun on a table beside him. The wolves continued to howl.

Hearing a light step behind him, Radd whirled, hand sliding toward the gun. Then he got very still.

Bill Tolliver stood in the kitchen doorway, a cold smile on his lips and a gun in his hand. Tolliver was bareheaded, his clothes dirty and torn. There was a wicked, merciless light in his dark eyes.

"I figgered yuh couldn't stand the dark for long, Sam," he said. "I sneaked in the back door before yuh lit the lamp. Go ahead, grab the gun if yuh'd rather. It might be easier that way."

"Bill, what yuh want here?" Radd asked hoarsely.

"I want you! Didn't I say I'd show yuh who'd have the most regret? Mebbe I'll show yuh who's the meanest, too. Get on yore feet and back against the wall!"

Slowly, Radd obeyed. Tolliver moved forward and took the gun from the table. Then he backed to a shelf at the far side of the room and took down a bottle half-filled with a grayish liquid. Radd licked dry lips, his eyes widening.

"What yuh aimin' to do with that, Bill?"

"Can't yuh guess?" Tolliver grinned again, maliciously. "Get that lantern off the nail there and light it."

Again Radd obeyed, stark certainty graying his face.

"You carry it," Tolliver ordered, when the lantern was burning. "Walk out that door—and don't forget this gun'll be just about a foot from yore striped back!"

"Bill, yuh're makin' a bad mistake. I didn't—"

"Move, blast yuh!"

Sam Radd unlatched the front door and went out, carrying the lantern, closely followed by Tolliver. Outside, Tolliver took a coiled rope from a nail on the wall.

"That way," Tolliver clipped. "Along the creek."

They walked along the creek bank, sometimes in deep shadows, sometimes in bright patches of moonlight. Radd's mind worked desperately, trying to find some way out of this predicament. He knew that, barring miracles, he was doomed. There was no mercy in Bill Tolliver. Maybe Sheriff Catwick was near, stalking Tolliver. But Radd knew that whatever happened would have to happen quickly.

He could hear Tolliver's solid footsteps directly behind him. Like, Radd thought despairingly, a stalking wolf. The thought made him strain his ears. The marauders were silent now. But they were still out there, stalking the thickets and ridges, hungry, savage.

"This'll do," Tolliver said suddenly.

They had come to a small, timber-hemmed clearing a quarter of a mile from the ranch-house. Nearby a nest of black, broken walls towered upward. At an order from Tolliver, Sam Radd placed the lantern on the ground.

"Put yore back to that tree," Tolliver said, motioning toward a pine whose bole was thick as a man's body.

"Bill, yuh can't do this!" Radd said desperately.

"Can't I?" the dark man spat. "I'll show yuh what I can do! Get against that tree or I'll blow yuh apart!"

/

HIS face pale and set, Radd obeyed. With the rope, Tolliver lashed him securely to the tree. Then Tolliver took from his pocket the bottle containing the grayish liquid. He uncorked the bottle and deliberately sprayed the liquid over Radd's clothes.

A sweetish odor that was vile and penetrating struck sharply at their nostrils. Sam Radd knew very well that the evil-smelling stuff was a powerful wolf lure. He knew that the hunger-driven beasts would tear to pieces anything alive even in the vicinity of that odor. With it on his clothes, he was as good as dead now.

"Bill," he pleaded, "don't do this to me. Them gray devils'll tear me to ribbons!"

"That's a fact," Tolliver sneered. "And I'll be close by. I'll hear yuh squealin' like the pig yuh are."

"Then yuh'll hear me till the day yuh die! Yuh won't ever be able to sleep good any more."

"I'll sleep, all right. But I'm givin' yuh a chance."

"What kind of chance?"

Tolliver took the six-shooter from his waist-band and removed from it all except a single cartridge. Then he stepped forward and placed it in Radd's hand.

"Don't try to use that bullet on me," he warned, "because then yuh wouldn't have even a slim chance. Yuh can raise that gun-muzzle just about to yore middle. If yuh'd rather have it that way, it suits me. If I hear the gun go off I'll come back and investigate. Don't be in any hurry, Sam. I've got plenty of time. Yuh've got just yore choice to make."

He took up the lantern, turned and started walking away. And Radd cursed him then, in a shrill, bitter voice. Bill Tolliver didn't pause or look back, but strode on out of the clearing, the lantern growing dimmer and dimmer until it vanished altogether.

Radd's tirade stopped suddenly. He stood tense, head on one side, listening. Then he heard the sound again—the fierce, drawn-out howl of a hunting wolf!

The sound sent wild fear leaping through Sam Radd. In a sudden frenzy he strained at his bonds. But he knew instantly that he was securely trussed, without hope of escape. He grew still again, sweat running over his face.

He heard the wolf's howl again, followed closely by several others. Were they closer? As soon as they caught a whiff of the powerful lure they would come bounding like gray demons through the timber, eyes wickedly aglare and fangs slavering. The wind made a laughing, mocking sound in the pines. Water in the nearby creek made a jeering sound.

Radd's head jerked up. There were the wolves again! And now, without doubt, the sounds were closer. And the cries had a different timbre—shorter, more savage and eager, as if the gaunt beasts scented meat. Without doubt, Radd knew, the wind had wafted to the pack the irresistible scent of the lure.

Sam Radd swore again, peering desperately about, the last wild, bitter hope for survival fading from his eyes. Sweat ran over his face, into his eyes and mouth. The gun-butt felt hot to the palm of his hand.

Now, suddenly, he heard the patter of padded feet. He heard savage, whining snarls, saw the fiery glow of fierce eyes in the shadowy timber.

"Bill—Bill!" Radd screamed.

The gun in his hand blazed and roared.

Obviously Bill Tolliver had been close, for he appeared almost instantly, swinging the lighted lantern. The slavering wolves slunk back into the thickets, snarling and whining.

Tolliver held up the lantern and looked at Radd. The bound man's eyes were wide, his face gray and tight with terror. His lips moved soundlessly.

"Didn't have the nerve to put that bullet where it belonged, huh?" Tolliver sneered. "What do yuh want?"

"I'll do what yuh want," Radd whimpered. "Only let me loose. In a few minutes, a dozen guns wouldn't keep them devils from tearin' me to pieces. Cut these ropes!"

"I'll cut 'em—after yuh do some talkin'."

"It'd put a rope about my neck."

"Mebbe it would. That was yore choice—the wolves, or a rope! It's all the same to me. Only, this time I won't be back!"

He wheeled, started walking swiftly away.

"Wait, Bill, wait! I'll do it—if you'll promise to let me go after I've talked."

TOLLIVER stopped, turned.

"I won't do a thing to stop yuh," he promised. "If yuh can make a getaway that's yore good luck."

"I—it was me that killed Clay Farnum and stole the bank money," Radd whined, "while pretendin' to be off in the hills lookin' for strays. I killed him because I thought he had recognized me. When I found out the bank had down the serial numbers of the money I'd taken, I was afraid to try to use it. So I got the idea of framin' the whole business onto you and collectin' the thousand-dollar bounty the bank had offered."

"Somethin' else," Tolliver said grimly. "Yuh remembered that when we went pardners in the Circle RT, we'd signed a paper sayin' that in case either of us died the whole outfit went to the one left alive. So, with me framed into a hangrope, yuh stood to gain not only a thousand dollars but my half of the outfit as well."

"Right," Radd agreed. "Now cut me loose!"

True to his promise, Bill Tolliver drew a long-bladed knife and slashed through the ropes that bound Radd. Radd stepped away from the tree, flexing his muscles.

"Remember, yuh promised to let me go."

"I said I wouldn't try to stop yuh," Tolliver agreed.

"But I didn't make any such promise," a bleak voice rapped, and Sheriff Catwick came clambering down from a niche in the walls, gun in hand. "Mebbe I won't either, Sam, if yuh want to make a run for it. Don't figger yuh'd get more'n a couple dozen jumps with that wolf lure on yore clothes."

Sam Radd had whirled, started to leap into the shadowy timber, but now he stopped abruptly. The pattering feet were still out there, the red-glaring eyes were inching closer. Radd glared from Sheriff Catwick to the grim-faced Bill Tolliver.

"You two tricked me!" he snarled.

"That's a plumb fact," the sheriff agreed mildly. "Gent wouldn't be much of a sheriff if he couldn't tell the smell of a skunk when it's up real close. It's bad, though, when he has to furnish the crowbar for a prisoner to break out of his own jail." He chuckled. "I figger we got just about time enough to get back on that wall before them four-footed deputies of mine and Bill's start snappin' at the seats of our pants. Or had yuh rather stay down here, Sam?"

Sam Radd was the first to reach the safety of the niche.

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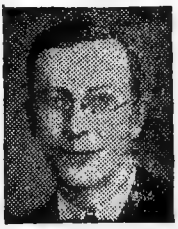

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"Yuh low-down killer," the sheriff said, "go for yore gun!"

MANHUNTERS AIN'T HUMAN

By SAM BRANT

Hot anger over a killing thaws Sheriff Leach's cold heart, but nothing can alter the deadly wisdom of his icy stare!

A TALL, lean man with frozen gray features and heatless dark eyes, Sheriff Mike Leach sat in his office in Apache Wells and watched the rider who was coming along the street. He knew the rider—stocky, tow-headed Sam Brett, who owned a little cow outfit over on Blackfoot Creek.

Brett, the sheriff saw, seemed in a hurry. His roan was sweat-covered, and he was angling toward the hitchrack before the sheriff's office.

Mike Leach grimaced. When a man had business with him it usually meant trouble. Else they kept their distance.

"Men," the cold-eyed lawman thought sardonically, "are like wolves, only worse. Wolves kill only when they are hungry."

After tying his horse, Brett came quickly into the office. Excitement was in his pale eyes.

"Sheriff," he said abruptly, without greeting, "I reckon yuh better get out to Lige Taggert's place."

"Why should I?" the sheriff asked. "What's wrong?"

"Old Lige has been killed!"

Mike Leach's eyes narrowed, but his still face showed no excitement at all.

"Who killed him, and why?" he asked.

"I don't know. All I know is he's dead. I stopped by his place a little while ago—aimed to buy some hay from him. When I couldn't rouse him, I opened the door and looked inside. There Lige was on the cabin floor, stone dead."

"Mebbe it was an accident."

"Mebbe—I don't know." Brett drew a shaky breath. "I didn't examine him close. Didn't look like any accident to me, though. He was layin' on his face, and looked like he'd been shot in the back. He was all messy. I—well, blood always makes me kind of weak to the stomach, so I got out of there quick and headed for town to tell you. Who yuh reckon could have done it?"

The sheriff got slowly to his feet. No emotion at all showed in his eyes. Men said that Mike Leach had a block of ice for a heart. They said he killed for the brutal pleasure of inflicting pain on others. They said his bitter, implacable hatred for all outlaws was only an excuse for those killings, a mask to hide his own wolfish nature.

"I don't know," Sheriff Leach said curtly in answer to Brett's question. "But if Lige Taggert was murdered I'll find out who done it, and kill him—or see that he hangs!"

"Mind if I ride back with yuh?" Brett asked. "Lige was a crusty, unsociable old coot, but I kind of cottoned to him. He pulled me out of a bad tight once with a loan."

"Suit yoreself," the sheriff said laconically. "I'll ride in ten minutes."

EXACTLY ten minutes later Sheriff Leach and Sam Brett rode out of Apache Wells, headed north toward old Lige Taggert's little outfit at the head of Turkey Canyon. Brett had spread the news of Taggert's death, and the citizens of Apache Wells watched the sheriff's departure with eyes that were cynical yet held a grudging respect.

While Mike Leach was not a man who invited friendship, no one denied that he had brought law and order to the county. His reputation had spread, and as a rule criminals steered clear of Apache Wells.

He was known as "the sheriff who would rather kill an outlaw than capture him." Cold, taciturn, he had no close friends, and if he wanted any nobody knew it. On the

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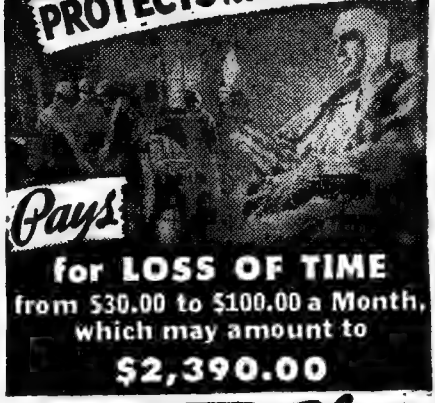

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"Without human feeling or kindness," smugly said those who had elected him sheriff —and felt glad and safe for the protection he afforded them. "A manhunter, a killer, a human bloodhound," they declared, and didn't linger longer than was necessary in his presence. . . .

It was shortly after noon when Sheriff Leach and Brett reached Lige Taggert's run-down ranchhouse. Taggert had lived here alone in his unclean log cabin, a miserly, surly oldster who did not welcome visitors unless they brought him profit in some form. He raised few cattle, but rather had of late years planted most of his acreage in stock feed which he stored until winter and sold for outrageous prices to his less far-sighted neighbors.

Lige Taggert had made money. And it was an ill-kept secret over the range that he distrusted banks. The few who had been admitted to his cabin hadn't missed seeing the old iron safe in a corner of his room.

Sheriff Leach found things at Taggert's cabin much as Sam Brett had said. Taggert was dead, even more unlovely in death than he had been in life. He lay sprawled on his face on the floor before the old iron safe. He had been shot in the back.

The safe door stood open. Papers were scattered about. Except for a few pennies there was no money in the safe.

"Don't touch anything," Leach told Sam Brett curtly. "Stay back out of the way till I have a look-see."

"I didn't touch a thing when I was here before," Brett protested. "I was plain scared, I reckon. First gent I ever seen who'd died by vi'lence."

The fat, bearded oldster, Leach judged, had been dead since some time the night before. He looked carefully over the room. There was no sign of a struggle.

"Whoever done it must have got Lige cold," Leach said, as if talking to himself. "He held a gun on Lige and made him open the safe. Then the skunk shot Lige in the back, took what money there was, and left."

"Way I see it," Brett agreed. "Yuh reckon he left a trail of some kind?"

The sheriff didn't answer. He stooped suddenly and took something from the floor almost under Taggert's body. He glanced at the small, shiny object, then thrust it into his pocket.

"Find something?" Brett asked curiously.

"Empty six-shooter shell," Leach grunted.

"Figger it come from the killer's gun?"

"Stands to reason, don't it? After shootin' Lige the killer must have punched out the empty and reloaded, without thinkin' what he was doin'. It's mistakes like that that prove all killers are dumb. Well, I reckon there's nothin' else to be found here. I'll have a look outside."

They went outside, and the sheriff started nosing about like an old hound dog. It took him less than five minutes to find the spot, in a cedar thicket a hundred yards behind the cabin, where the killer had left his horse, to sneak up to Taggert's cabin afoot. To Leach's experienced eyes the story was plain.

"Now we got somethin' to go on!" Brett declared excitedly. "All we've got to do is foller them tracks and we've got the killer."

"Looks like!" Mike Leach's eyes were as hard as agates, and glowed with an inner fire that was wickedly eager. "I'll get the snake that done it if I have to foller him to perdition!"

They got their horses and took up the trail. It led almost due west. Obviously the killer, despite the fact that it was dark, had ridden fast after leaving Taggert's cabin. At first he had made no effort to conceal his trail. After a couple of miles, however, probably after the killer had recovered from his first panic, the tracks became harder to follow.

BUT Leach was an expert tracker. He clung grimly to the trail, followed by Sam Brett. And, after a five-mile ride, they paused atop a ridge and sat looking down into a miniature valley between two timbered slopes.

Down there was a log cabin ranchhouse, well-kept and relatively new, sheds, and a corral that held several cows. Smoke was curling from the cabin chimney. A creek wound along the floor of the swale between the ridges. In a second corral was a rangy sorrel horse.

The slight figure of a boy was in front of the cabin. Evidently about eleven or twelve years old, he was dressed in faded denims and a checked shirt. He was swinging a lariat, trying to lasso a post.

The trail the sheriff and Brett had been following led down off the ridge, straight toward the ranch buildings.

"Matt Taos!" Brett breathed, glancing ob-

[*Turn page*]

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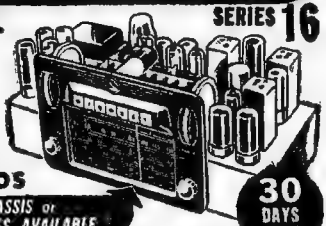
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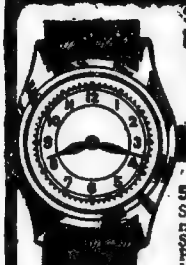
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liquely at the tall sheriff. "I . . . By gosh this is goin' to be hard to swallow."

Leach said nothing for a moment. His face might have been carved from stone. The little cow outfit down there, he knew, belonged to Matt Taos. Matt lived there with his son, Nick, the boy's mother having died two or three years before. Taos had served a prison sentence for cattle stealing but most folks in the county believed he was innocent of the crime.

"Somethin' else'll make it look bad for Matt, too," Brett went on, shaking his head. "There was that run-in Matt had with Lige in town a couple days ago. The whole town heard it. Over some money Matt owed Lige, wasn't it?"

"You ought to know," grunted the sheriff. "Yuh stood not ten feet away and took it all in."

"So did a dozen others, includin' you," Brett protested. "That's what might make it go hard with Matt—the threats he made. Sheriff, I wish I hadn't come with you. I'd be willin' to turn and ride away, and just forget about what I've seen, if it'd help any. Matt Taos is my neighbor."

"It wouldn't help any," Leach said coldly. "A killer's a killer, and they're a buzzardly breed. I'd like to stand by and see 'em all burn in purgatory!"

Brett looked at the sheriff, and shivered, seeing the wholly savage and merciless light in the lawman's eyes.

"If that's the way yuh want it," Brett muttered. "Me, I ain't all stone and ice like you. I got a heart. It'll go kind of hard with that button down there, though. What about him?"

"Well, what about him?"

"Could yuh sleep good at night, knowin' yuh'd took a boy's daddy away from him?"

"Brett, yuh're meddlin' in somethin' that ain't yore business," Leach said furiously. He controlled himself with an effort, but the dark bitterness remained in his eyes. "If it'll help yuh any to know, I once had a boy. That was years ago, up in Montana. He was just about the same age as Matt Taos' kid down there. His mother was dead too, and he liked to ride and rope and swim just like I reckon that button does.

"One day he rode into town with me in the buckboard. We wus ridin' along the street when these four masked hombres come from the bank. They jumped onto their hosses and started along the street toward

us, firin' their guns in all directions. I pulled over to the side, to let 'em pass. I didn't try to stop 'em, didn't even have a gun. But that didn't make any difference—they cut down on us. I heard the boy kind of sigh and then he fell over against me. He was dead.

"A month later I pinned on a badge, swearin' that I'd fight outlaws and killers until I died, and that I'd never let one live if I could kill him. That's what I've done!"

"I—I'm plumb sorry, Sheriff," Sam Brett said huskily. "I reckon I didn't savvy."

But Mike Leach had already nudged his buckskin down the slope toward the ranch buildings. Brett followed. A moment later they pulled up before the log ranchhouse. The freckled, tow-headed youngster had stopped his practise with the rope and regarded them with wide, wary eyes.

"Yore paw at home, sonny?" the sheriff asked.

The boy nodded. "Somebody to see yuh, Pap!" he called.

A big, blond man with broad tanned features came from the cabin. He looked unsmilingly at the two, nodded curtly. He wore faded levis and a gray shirt, and a bone-handled .44 six-shooter was strapped about his waist. In a land of .45s, the sheriff could remember few men who owned .44 guns.

"Light down, gents," Taos said cordially.

MIKE LEACH swung to the ground, followed after a moment's hesitation by Brett. There was a certain wariness about the young rancher, Taos. He knew this was not a friendly visit. The boy was watching wide-eyed.

"I reckon I'll have to arrest yuh, Taos," Leach said bluntly.

Taos showed no surprise, only a slight stiffening of his body.

"Why?"

"For killin' Lige Taggert."

"If Taggert's dead I didn't kill him."

"That'll be for a jury to decide! I'll take yore gun."

"You let my Pap alone!" Nick Taos cried shrilly. "He never killed anybody. Somebody's always devilin' him."

The boy took a step forward, the rope drawn back threateningly, his eyes blazing.

"It's all right, Nick," Matt Taos said gently. "Everything's goin' to be fine."

He offered no resistance as the sheriff

[*Turn page*]

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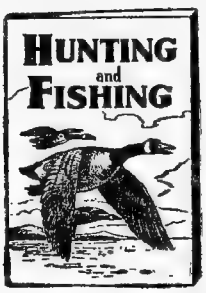

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stepped forward and lifted the .44 from its holster.

"Now mebbe yuh'll tell me what this is all about," he said stiffly.

"Got a bad memory?" Leach asked sardonically. "All right, some time last night Lige Taggert was killed and his safe robbed. Brett here rode by there this mornin' and found him. We rode out, picked up the killer's trail in a cedar thicket and followed it straight to here. That help any?"

"It proves somebody's plumb loco! I went to bed early last night and didn't wake up till daylight."

"Yuh got proof of that?"

"Why—why, nobody except the button here. And I reckon he was asleep too. See here, Sheriff—just because I done time in the pen yuh can't—"

"That's got nothin' to do with it! Let's have a look at the sorrel over there."

They walked over to the corral. A brief examination showed dried sweat on the sorrel's back and sides, proof that the animal had been ridden hard, not recently, but several hours before. One flank had been slashed cruelly with a spur.

Sam Brett spoke. "Been several hours since that bronc was rode, Sheriff."

"That's just it," Mike Leach said grimly. "Some time last night, I'd say. How about that, Taos?"

The rancher's eyes held bitter desperation.

"I don't know. I saw, when I watered and fed the sorrel this mornin', that he'd been rode. But it wasn't me that rode him. I don't know who did. You two figger it out, yuh're so cussed certain it was me killed Lige!"

"I had nothin' to do with this, Matt," Brett denied quickly. "When I come along I had no idea how it'd turn out. I got to admit it looks bad, follerin' a trail here and findin' yore sorrel like this. That, and the quarrel yuh had with Lige in town two days ago. But I still ain't sayin' yuh done it."

"Shore, I quarreled with Taggert," Matt Taos said quietly. "When I borrered that five hundred dollars from him last year I didn't know what a doublecrossin' skunk he was. Two weeks ago I went to him, told him I didn't have the money to pay, and asked for an extension. He said it was all right. Said he was busy then, but to come back today—that's when the note falls due—and we'd fix up the papers.

"Well, I began to smell a rat, and mentioned it to him two days ago. He denied

tellin' me I could have an extension. Said that if I didn't pay every penny when the note was due he'd take my outfit. I kind of went off half-cocked, I reckon, and said some things. But it wasn't a killin' matter."

"Not unless yuh needed that money in Taggert's safe."

"My pap didn't kill anybody!" the freckled boy shrilled again, angrily. "Just because yuh're a sheriff yuh got no right to come here pesterin' us! I've heard about you! Yuh ain't human—yuh shoot men down just because yuh like to kill, yuh beast!"

"Nick!" Matt Taos said sharply. "Be quiet . . . That all the evidence yuh've got, Sheriff?"

"I reckon so. But, it's enough."

"How about that empty forty-four shell yuh found on Taggert's floor?" Brett interrupted. "Not many men pack a forty-four."

Sam Brett suddenly clamped his lips together. Mike Leach had turned slowly, was staring at him with implacable eyes.

"Brett," he said flatly, "yuh're a filthy, low-down killer! Go for yore gun!"

Sam Brett's face had gone chalky.

"W-what yuh mean, Sheriff?" he stammered.

"What I said! You killed Lige Taggert, looted his safe, and tried to frame it onto Matt Taos. I've got less use for a back-shootin' killer than for a snake. Draw!"

"No—wait!" Brett cried desperately. "I . . . Yuh must be loco! Yuh got no proof I done that."

"All the proof I need. Yuh come here while Matt Taos and the boy was asleep last night, stole the sorrel from the corral, rode it to Taggert's place. Yuh murdered Taggert, robbed his safe. Then yuh rode the sorrel back here in a hurry, pretendin' to try to hide yore trail but really makin' shore it could be follered. Yuh figgered that, along with the quarrel Matt had had with Taggert, would hang him."

"Yuh're crazy! Why would I do that?"

"Because yuh're a crooked, murderin' snake! And it's not exactly a guess. When Matt wears a spur, he wears it on the right side. On this whole range, Brett, I know only one man who wears a spur on his left heel. That man is you. And the sorrel there, Brett, is marked on the left side!"

"That's no proof. Yuh can't arrest me!"

"In my own mind I know yuh're guilty, and that's enough. Yuh seem to like killer law, and that's the kind I'm givin' yuh. I'm givin' yuh an even break. Draw, cuss yuh!"

[*Turn page*]

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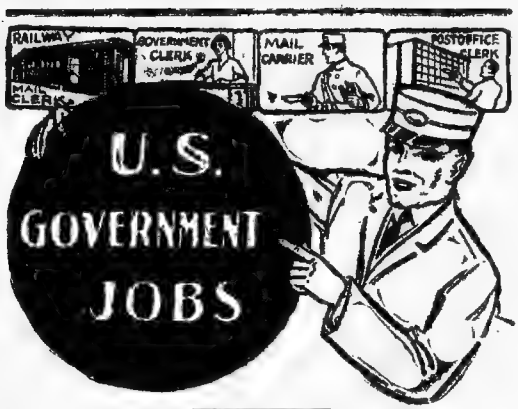

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Mike Leach had crouched lower now. His relentless eyes were as bleak as glacier ice.

Sweat was running over Brett's face. His eyes were wide and bitter.

"For the last time, Brett, draw!"

All the courage seemed suddenly to go out of Brett, leaving him limp and trembling.

"No—no, I won't do it!" he whimpered. "Yuh *want* to kill me! Yuh want to see me there on the ground, kickin' and dyin'. If yuh shoot me, it'll be murder. I—I killed Taggert—I'm willin' to stand trial for it. Only don't shoot me!"

Contempt in his eyes, Leach stepped forward and took Brett's gun. "Too yeller to live—or die—by yore own law," he sneered.

"By gosh, Sheriff," Matt Taos said, moments later, "yuh nearly had me convinced I had killed Lige Taggert. How'd yuh figger it was Brett that'd done it?"

"Why, Brett convicted hisself," the sheriff said slowly. "There was them spur marks on the left side of yore sorrel. And another thing—Brett aimed to make folks think you'd killed and robbed Taggert to get the money to pay off the mortgage against yore outfit. He didn't know I'd loaned yuh the five hundred, right after that spat yuh had with Taggert, to pay off that note."

"I thought about that," Taos admitted. "I hadn't mentioned it, because yuh asked me not to. But that was pretty slim evidence—that, and the spur marks—to accuse a man of murder on. Was that all?"

"Not quite." The tall sheriff looked with grim humor at the crest-fallen killer. "Brett tipped his hand when he said, 'How about that forty-four shell yuh found on Taggert's floor?' Happened I'd put that shell in my pocket right quick, without givin' Brett time to see it, and I hadn't said anything about it bein' a forty-four. If he hadn't left that shell there a-purpose, after killin' Taggert with a forty-four, how would he have known what caliber it was?"

"By gosh, Sheriff, yuh're plumb smart!" young Nick Taos declared admiringly. "I reckon I'll be a lawman like you when I grow up." He looked embarrassed, wriggling his bare toes in the dust. "I—I'm sorry I said them things about yuh. I take 'em back. Yuh reckon yuh could come out and visit Pap and me sometime?"

"Why, I reckon I could," Mike Leach said softly. His eyes were clear and without bitterness. "Mebbe right often. How about next Sunday to start with?"

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TRAIL BLAZERS

(Continued from page 10)

locally favorable cash crops such as beans, potatoes, or sometimes sugar beets. There should be enough dairy cows or other livestock maintained to utilize the feed produced.

That's merely a generalization. There is no cut and dried rule to follow in irrigation farming. In some sections, or in some cases where the best crop production bet is hay and pasture the entire farm may be devoted principally to livestock. Dairy cattle, beef cattle, or even sheep. In other cases fruit and vegetable raising, poultry, or turkey raising may be the main enterprise.

The choice is wide and the possible combinations numerous. But the settler must make his own decisions, using his special talents and experience to help him plot out the most likely direction in which his individual farm success will lie.

Whatever the ultimate choice some type of intensive farming is virtually a prerequisite to successful irrigation farming. Inasmuch as the water used must be paid for, high crop

[*Turn page*]

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returns or high value crops are needed to make the land pay off. On the other hand the very fact that high value crops *can* be produced on irrigated land results in smaller farms, that is smaller acreages, being necessary.

Most general purpose irrigated farms are less than 100 acres in size. Popular sub-divisions are 40 acre farms, or 80 acre farms.

How and when irrigation water is used are other factors important to the success of irrigated farming. Most crops must be irrigated several times during the growing season. When they need water the correct amount should be distributed evenly over the crop area.

Too much water can cause important plant foods to leach out of the soil. Too little will cut down the crop yield, as will water applied at the wrong time.

All this won't make you an experienced irrigation farmer in a few minutes' reading time. It's not intended to. The idea is simply to give a few pointers, sufficient to demonstrate that there are wrinkles to successful irrigation farming that require special skills, knowledge and experience.

For that matter putting new land into fruitful production has always been a job that takes a bit of doing. But it's been done before and it's being done today. The modern settlers around Prosser are tackling it with the spirit and courage that led an earlier generation of homeseekers to the first founding of a new empire at the end of the Oregon Trail.

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That's all for now, yuh western-minded guys and gals. There'll be more next issue.

—*Captain Ranger.*

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

A WILD, woolly, and whacky new adventure of the West's funniest favorites —Tombstone and Speedy—tops the list in the next issue of EXCITING WESTERN. It's called THE LAW OF AVERAGES and is written, of course, by that master spinner of yarns that tickle your funnybone, W. C. Tuttle.

It all began when Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith climbed off the caboose of a long cattle train and came down to the depot, limping a little in their high-heel boots and carrying their war-bags. They were back to the headquarters of the Cattlemen's Association and none too happy about it.

As they limped up to the depot they were handed a telegram from their boss, Jim Keaton.

"No report from you on last two cases," the wire read. "You are impossible. Come

in at once. I need men I can depend on."

"Good!" grunted Tombstone. "I'm glad he appreciates us."

"Appreciates us?" gasped Speedy.

"Shore. He says for us to come in at once 'cause he needs men he can depend on."

"I hope yuh're right," sighed Speedy, "but it don't read like that to me."

"That's the worst of bein' able to read, Speedy—yuh get things all wrong."

They limped down to the Cattlemen's Association office.

Jim Keaton was more than a little peeved that he had not heard from his two men in weeks.

"We cleaned up both cases you had us on, Jim," said Speedy.

"I know you did," Keaton snapped back. "I managed to get reports from two sheriffs—but none from you two. Where is the six thousand dollars you two got on that deal in Apache Butte?"

"Jim," replied Tombstone soberly, "anybody will tell yuh that if yuh keep puttin' yore money on the Double O, the law of averages will make yuh e-ventually win."

"Some day," said Keaton soberly, "when you're both old—you'll look back and wish you had saved your money."

"I'd like to ask yuh a honest question, Jim," said Tombstone. "Did yuh ever see a *old* range detective?"

"Well, I suppose there is. I don't know of one off-hand, Tombstone."

"They don't last," declared Tombstone.

"The law of averages works on 'em," said Speedy.

"I wouldn't worry too much about detectives," said Keaton. "From now on your life expectancy may increase. In other words, I've got to replace you two. I'm sorry, but you two are unreliable."

"Yuh mean, we're fired?" asked Speedy.

"Yes, I'm afraid that is what I mean, Speedy."

At that moment a man came in and handed Jim Keaton several telegrams. Jim Keaton stared at one of them as he read it, his face just a bit white under his natural tan. The message told of the shooting of Jim Haley, the new man Keaton had hired to take the place of Tombstone and Speedy.

"Well," said Tombstone, "I reckon the law of averages caught up with him."

"Wait a minute!" snapped Keaton. "You two head out there for West Fork right away. I want the man who killed Haley. There's

[*Turn page*]

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too much killing of association men going on. Now get out of here! And blast your hides, if you don't report to me, I'll shoot you both on sight. You never reported, but you might."

"Yeah," nodded Tombstone gravely. "The law of averages might work out, Jim."

That's the breezy style in which THE LAW OF AVERAGES begins. Action, mystery, suspense, and side-splitting laughs are packed into this zany tale that's featured in the next issue of EXCITING WESTERN. You'll be missing a lot if you don't read it.

Also in the same issue will be SHOWDOWN RIDES THE RIVER, by Walker A. Tompkins. It's a story filled with action right from the start when Clint Gregg, young printer on a cowtown newspaper, goes down into the millrace to chop free a snag that has fouled the waterwheel supplying the motive power for his newspaper press.

The night was black, but Gregg could see a man poling a raft on the river and apparently trying to make a landing on the sandbar which the tailrace had thrust out into the river. The man seemed to be in trouble.

"Keep polin', amigo!" Gregg shouted to him, waving his lantern. "I'll wade out an' lend you a hand."

A guttural oath was Gregg's answer. Then a six-gun spat flame from the blackness and a bullet snuffed out Gregg's lantern.

A second bullet ricocheted off the water alongside Gregg's boots. A moment later, Gregg saw the gunman scramble up on the mudbank and disappear into the night.

Gregg didn't get the significance of the incident until he climbed the stairs back up to the newspaper office and met his boss, old Pop Dorrigan.

"The devil's broke loose up in the Copperlodes tonight, Clint!" the old man yelled. "Somebody dynamited the railway trestle up the river and wrecked a train load of lumber. The fireman talked before he died. He said the man who touched off the dynamite made his getaway—on a raft down the river!"

Look forward to SHOWDOWN RIDES THE RIVER, by Walker A. Tompkins, for gunsmoke thrills and action!

A new Navajo Raine novelet by Jackson Cole is also in the next, great all-star issue. It is called RANGERS RIDE ALONE and is sure to please all you Navajo Raine fans.

In addition, we'll have another TRAIL BLAZERS chat, and many other crack western yarns of the kind that have made EXCITING WESTERN a consistent winner!

There's excitement in every page, from cover to cover in the next issue!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

WE have received interesting letters this time, and we only hope that you readers keep on writing as faithfully as you have in the past. It's through your letters that we get to know what you like and don't like. So don't be bashful. Let us hear what you have to say—be it praise or blame!

I read an article in a recent issue of EXCITING WESTERN in which it was stated that gold mining in Arizona was out. I know better. I came to Arizona twelve years ago from Michigan. We have an open pit gold mine which contains a lot of ore, but the country is so rugged it's hard to get at. We have never worked the mine ourselves but we have been told by those who know that good gold was taken out, and samples taken from all around show gold. There is also placer gold in the washes.—*Pearl Rose, Bumble Bee, Arizona.*

Of all the western magazines that I have read I think EXCITING WESTERN is tops in reading entertainment. I can't find a story in each issue that is not chock full of laughs and thrills. Keep up the good work!—*Charles Beal, Broken Bow, Nebraska.*

I read EXCITING WESTERN every month and the stories are always very exciting. Tombstone and Speedy are my favorites and then comes Navajo Raine. But why do you miss having a Navajo Raine story in some issues?—*A. N. Horne, Shoreham, Vermont.*

I like EXCITING WESTERN very much, though some of your stories aren't so good. My rating of the stories is—first, W. C. Tuttle's Tombstone and Speedy yarns, second, Alamo Paige, and third, Navajo Raine. The Tombstone and Speedy stories are super.—*Walter Paulsen, Chinook, Montana.*

Your Tombstone and Speedy novelets are the best of the lot, and so is Alamo Paige. Your yarns would be more popular if you keep them complete. Down here we all clamor for EXCITING WESTERN, and it would be a pity if it ran serials and we missed an installment.—*Kenneth Newman, Cape Town, South Africa.*

That's all we can quote from our mail bag this time, but the above are typical of hundreds of communications received—for which we thank all of you. We'll be back next issue with plenty more letters and postcards, and we'll be looking for one from—YOU! So sit down pronto and drop us a line about what you like in EXCITING WESTERN, and what you don't like. Please address your mail to The Editor, EXCITING WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N.Y.

Thanks everybody—and so long until next issue.

—THE EDITOR.

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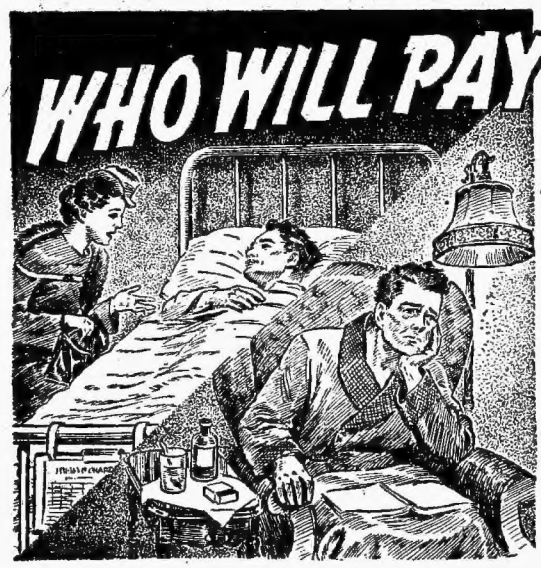

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